

NAVIGATING THE HIDDEN TRACKS OF EDUCATION: A CRITICAL RACE ANALYSIS
OF ACADEMIC TRACKING THROUGH CHOICE PRACTICES

BY

NANCY D. CARDENAS GONZALEZ

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Adrienne D. Dixson, Chair
Professor Anne Hass-Dyson
Professor Julie Dowling
Professor Jonathan X. Inda

ABSTRACT

Despite efforts to close the achievement gap by detracking courses in secondary schools, students of color continue to graduate ill-prepared to enter and excel in higher education and enter the 21st century workforce. Practices like tracking continue to be key factors in underpreparing students of color and limiting their access to a high-quality education.

While tracking has been recognized to cause more harm to students of color, it continues to exist in schools through colorblind practices like choice practices, making them a more acceptable means to provide students a differentiated and unequal education. The aim of this research is to examine how tracking continues to function in detracked schools adopting freedom of choice in course enrollment. From a Critical Race framework, this study will explore how choice practices influence the academic choices and outcomes of students of color. Through open-ended interviews with students and parents from Willow Glen High School, the following questions were examined: 1) What institutional factors (e.g. guidance counselors, teachers, tests, peers, etc.) are influencing students' own academic perceptions, decisions, and outcomes? 2) How do students describe their educational experiences along racial and class lines? After the data was collected and transcribed, the data was organized into themes that both align with the CRT tenets (racism is endemic, whiteness as property, colorblindness, interest convergence, counter storytelling, intersectionality) and represent the students' academic experience with tracking through choice practices.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework	19
Chapter 3: Methods.....	66
Chapter 4: Findings.....	90
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion	134
References.....	155

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background to the Problem

Within the past half century policy makers have shifted their focus to ensuring that students are graduating high school prepared to enter and excel in higher education and in the 21st century workforce. By implementing policies and programs such as the Common Core State Standards and the College and Career Readiness Standards and Assessments (U.S Department of Education, n.d.a; U.S Department of Education, n.d.b), educational leaders hope to not only close the achievement gap but also ensure that low-income and students of color can gain access to opportunities that would allow them to move up into middle-income and middle class (U.S Department of Education, n.d.a; U.S Department of Education, n.d.b).

While these and other efforts have led to an increase in high school graduation and college enrollment rates, not all students are graduating fully prepared to enter and excel in higher education and in the workforce (Taylor, Turk, Chessman & Espinosa, 2019). More specifically, students of color are leaving these institutions underprepared to enroll, perform, and complete a college degree (Kena, Aud, Johnson, Wang, Zhang, Rathbun, Wilkinson-Flicker, and Kristapovich, 2014; Ross, Kena, Rathbun, KewalRamani, Zhang, Kristapovich, & Manning, 2012; Taylor et al., 2019; United States Executive Office of the President, 2014). From the national sample (1,782,820) of the 2019 graduating class (as seen in Table 1.1), only 26% of high school graduates met the ACT college readiness benchmarks in math, science, reading and English (ACT, 2019). When disaggregated by race, 11% of African Americans, 23% of Latinos, 62% of Asian American, 13% of American Indian and Alaska Natives, and 47% of White high school graduates were college ready in all four subjects (ACT, 2019). When compared to SAT

outcomes (as seen in Table 1.1), among the 2.2 million students who took the SAT in 2019, 45% met the college readiness benchmark for evidence-based reading and writing and math (Taylor et al., 2019). When examining these outcomes by race /ethnicity, 75% Asian students met both benchmarks, as did 57% of White students and 76% of students from more than one race. In contrast, 58% of American Indian and Alaska Natives, 53% of Black, 7% of all Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, and 43% of Latino students did not meet either benchmark (Taylor et al., 2019).

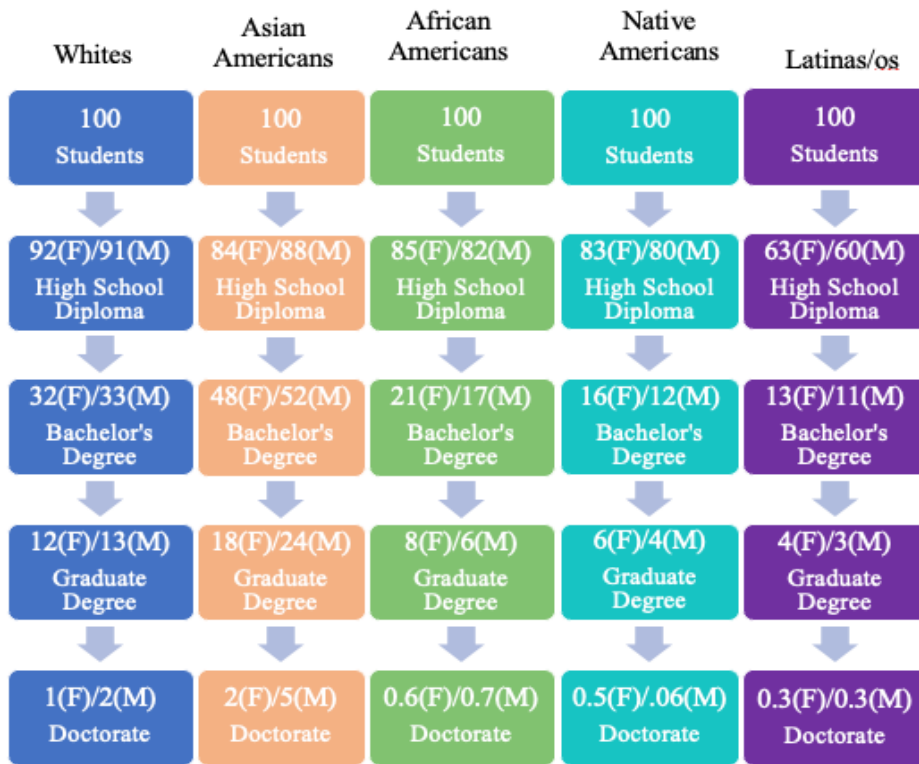
Table 1.1
2019 National Graduates Meeting ACT College Readiness Benchmarks (Math, Reading, Science, English) and SAT Benchmarks in Evidence Based Readings and Writing

	ACT					SAT			
	English	Math	Reading	Science	All Four Subjects	Evidence Based Reading & Writing	Math	Both Benchmarks	Neither Benchmarks
<i>All Racial and Ethnic groups</i>	59%	39%	45%	36%	26%	68%	48%	45%	30%
<i>American Indian and Alaska Native</i>	29%	14%	21%	13%	7%	39%	21%	18%	58%
<i>Asian</i>	77%	68%	62%	60%	50%	83%	80%	75%	11%
<i>Black/African Americans</i>	32%	12%	20%	11%	6%	46%	22%	20%	53%
<i>Latino</i>	44%	25%	32%	22%	14%	55%	31%	29%	43%
<i>Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander</i>	38%	23%	26%	19%	13%	51%	29%	27%	47%
<i>White</i>	70%	48%	54%	45%	33%	80%	59%	57%	18%
<i>More than one race</i>	61%	39%	48%	37%	26%	76%	53%	51%	22%

Source: Drawn from Taylor et al. (2019). Race and ethnicity in higher education: 2020 supplement. Washington, DC: American Council on Education. ACT U.S. High School Graduating Class Data: 2019, <https://www.act.org/content/act/en/research/services-and-resources/data-and-visualization/grad-class-database.html> | College Board, 2019 SAT Suite of Assessments Annual Report

The lack of preparation becomes more apparent when examining the educational attainment of students of color. From their analysis of the 2012 American Community Survey used in the U.S. Census, Pérez Huber et al. (2015), found that the educational attainment of African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinas/os falls far behind that of their White and Asian peers. As Figure 1.1 illustrates, for every 100 female students about 21 African Americans, 16 Native Americans, and 13 Latinas earn a bachelor's degree when compared to 48 Asians, and 32 Whites. For males, this number drops with about 17 African Americans, 12 Native Americans, and 11 Latinos earning a bachelor's degree. As observed by Perez Huber et al. (2015) and Taylor et al. (2019), once enrolled in college, American Indian and Alaska Native, Black, male Latinos, Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander students were more likely than White students to take developmental/remedial courses two or more levels below college level courses; affecting their persistence rates.

Figure 1.1
The U.S. Educational Pipeline by Race/Ethnicity and Gender



Source: Drawn from Pérez Huber et al. (2015). Still falling through the cracks: revisiting the latina/o education pipeline. CSRC Research Report. Number 19 - from American Community Survey (ACS) data for 2012, compiled by the US Bureau of the Census.

When examining the pre-college experiences of students of color, aside from Asian students, Black, Latinos, American Indian and Alaska Native students receive little to not college preparation opportunities within their schools and communities (Orfield & Ee, 2014). More specifically, for high school students of color, they often have little to no access to Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate courses (IB), or Dual Enrollment courses (Taylor et al., 2019). The Advanced Placement Program, founded by the college board, allows high school students to take courses modeled to reflect the rigor and curriculum of an introductory college course in the following subjects: arts, English, history and social sciences, interdisciplinary, math, computer science, sciences, and world languages and cultures. The International

Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IB) offers high school students the opportunity to earn college credit for enrolling in courses that increase their knowledge of theory, writing extended essays, and completing a project incorporating creativity, activity, and service for any of the following subject groups: language and literature, language acquisition, individuals and societies, science, mathematics, and the arts (Taylor et al., 2019). Through the partnerships between high schools and local institutions of higher education, Dual Enrollment courses offer high school students the opportunity to enroll in academic or career/technical college courses in their high schools and upon passing the course may earn dual credit for college and high school (NCES, 2019).

As many states gained additional funding to expand access to these courses, participation in these courses remains low among historically marginalized students (Klopfenstein, 2004; Klugman, 2013). For example, according to the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (Dalton, Ingels, & Fritch, 2018) when compared to 39.4% of Whites and 67% of Asian students, only 15.8% of American Indian and Alaska Natives, 22.5 % of Blacks, 32.6% of Latinos nationwide enrolled in these courses. These equates to around two-thirds of all Asian students taking an AP course, compared with roughly one in five African Americans, one in six Native American and Alaska Natives, and one in three Latino students.

One of the various factors impacting access to these courses is the use of academic tracking practices. Tracking is the practice of dividing and assigning students into specific instructional groups based on similar academic abilities, achievements, and interests (Ansalone, 2000; Dickens, 1996; Mills, Bryan, & Southern Regional Council, 1976; Oakes, 2005; Vanfossen et al., 1987). It is mainly practiced in high schools, where students are tracked into advanced placement, general, honors, bachelorette, or vocational courses with the

recommendation of teachers, counselors, parents, and the use of standardized tests (Kelly & Carbonado, 2012; Mills, et al., 1976; Oakes, 2005). Tracking continues to be controversial due to the reason that not all students benefit from its use (Green, 1999; Oakes, 2005; Rubin & Noguera, 2004). Proponents of tracking have shown strong support for these methods based on the idea that tracking allows for students diverse learning needs to be met by providing them with the opportunity to learn in homogenous classrooms where teachers are better able to teach to students with similar abilities (Ansolone, 2000; Hoffer, 1992; Green, 1999; Oakes, 2005; Vanfossen et al., 1987). Opponents have argued that this system fails students, but more specifically low-income and students of color, by funneling them into general and sometimes remedial courses that underprepares them for college and to enter a high-skilled and higher-wage workforce (Green, 1999; Oakes, 2005; Rubin, 2003, 2006; Rubin & Noguera, 2004).

While schools may not openly discuss how they utilize tracking within their schools, researchers argue that it is rare for schools to not have a sorting mechanism that helps educate students with different abilities (Oakes, 2005; Vanfossen et al., 1987). Unlike the early 1900's, where tracking was based off of a person's race and IQ score, tracking in today's schools include the recommendations of various personnel such as teachers, parents, along with using student's achievement scores on standardized tests (Green, 1999; Kelly, & Carbonado, 2012; Mills, et al., 1976; Oakes, 2005; Vanfossen et al., 1987). Additionally, tracking also involves ability grouping. As a subcategory of tracking, ability grouping is also another way in which students are grouped within and between subjects and is based on students' perceived academic level (Dickens, 1996; Hoffer, 1992; Lleras & Rangel, 2009; Mills, et al., 1976). Although tracking has been criticized for its unequal outcomes in learning and academic gains along racial, gender, income, and ability lines, schools found other methods to track students.

After tracking was criticized and condemned by the courts, organizations, and scholars during the 1980's and 1990's, detracking reforms became pivotal for addressing the effects of segregation and lack of access for low-income and students of color (Rubin, 2006; Welner & Oakes, 1996). Among detracking methods, choice practices became a popular method for desegregating and de-tracking students within and between schools (Noguera & Wing, 2006; Rubin, 2003, 2006; Rubin and Noguera, 2004; Yonezawa, 2000; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006; Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002). Through the claim that choice in course enrollment is colorblind and allows all students to have control over their educational trajectories, schools have opted for this method for course placement (Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002). However, similar to school choice, freedom of choice in course enrollment can be masked by institutional and social factors that safeguard the academic opportunities of Whites and other high-income groups (Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002). That is, when schools solely rely on choice practices as a detracking and/or desegregation method, underlying racial issues can remain, resulting in little to no change in increasing access and opportunities for students of color (*Parent Involved vs. Seattle*, 2007; Scott, 2011; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013; Rubin, 2003, 2006; Rubin & Noguera, 2004; Rubin and Silva, 2003; Yonezawa, 2000; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006; Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002). In order to ensure that tracking does not re-emerge in detracked schools, a critical examination of the complexity behind choice and its relation to race and inequity is needed. More specifically, research examining the ways in which social and institutional factors influence the academic choices of students of color will help us understand whether students are afforded the genuine opportunity to make well-informed choices in course enrollment.

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to expand on previous (Yonezawa & Jones, 2006; Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002) research by examining the process and outcomes of choice

practices as a detracking mechanism for students of color. More specifically, I am interested in examining the institutional and social factors that influence choice in course enrollment for students of color and whether these factors aid detracking mechanisms or uphold academic tracking practices at Willow Glen High School from a Critical Race Theoretical (CRT) framework. Through a qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews with students and parents of color, I hope to examine the following questions through a CRT perspective that engages six prominent tenets (counter-storytelling, the permanence of racism, Whiteness as property, interest convergence, intersectionality, and the critique of liberalism):

1) What institutional factors (e.g. guidance counselors, teachers, tests, peers, etc.) are influencing students' academic decisions and outcomes?

2) How does the intersection of race and class influence students' academic choices, opportunities, and perceptions of themselves and their peers?

Theoretical Lens

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) serves as the main theoretical and analytical framework to explore the ways that tracking continues to exist in schools through the use of choice practices (Chapman, 2013; Chapman & Antrop-Gonzalez, 2011; Dixson, 2011; Dixson, James-Galloway, Cardenas, Perkins-Williams, 2020; Khalil & Brown, 2020; Thompson Dorsey & Roulhac, 2019). The critical examination of who benefits from these practices and policies and the ways they influence the academic opportunities of students of color can be better examined and explained through the utilization of CRT as a theoretical and analytical tool. In examining these questions, race and racism are placed at the forefront in order to uncover the complex ways that inequity

continues within schools through colorblind policies and practices and the ways in which they can be addressed.

The idea that CRT should be used to examine race and racism in the education system can be credited Ladson-Billings and Tate (Ladson-Billings, 1996,1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano, 1997, 1998; Tate, 1997). Ladson-Billings and Tate, as well as other CRT scholars in education, recognize that race, a social construct, must be examined due to the various ways it shapes the academic experiences and outcomes of students of color (e.g., less access to high quality teachers, curricula, and classes, attend schools with less per pupil spending, are suspended and expelled at disproportionately higher rates, etc.). Utilizing CRT in education is different, yet significant, from other critical and theoretical frameworks because it simultaneously:

(1) foregrounds race and racism in the research, (2) challenges the traditional paradigms, methods, and texts, and separates discourse on race, gender, and class by showing how these social constructs intersect to impact students of color, (3) helps us focus on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of students of color, (4) offers a liberatory and transformative method when examining racial, gender, and class discrimination, and (5) utilizes the transdisciplinary knowledge and methodological base of ethnic studies, women's studies, sociology, history, and the law to better understand the various forms of discrimination (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 24).

Critical Race scholars in education analyze, explain, and challenge racial inequity via six main tenets of CRT (racism is endemic, Whiteness as property, colorblindness, interest convergence, counter-storytelling, and intersectionality). Through these tenets, Critical Race scholars actively work towards reforming education and ending all forms of oppression (DeCuir and Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano, 1997, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005). While conducting and analyzing this study, each tenet was pivotal in examining the impact of choice practices on academic tracking for students of

color. The six CRT tenets identified in the literature will be outlined below and furthered explored in Chapter 2.

One of the main components of CRT is the concept of permanence of racism. Racism, conscious or unconscious, is a permanent component of American life, due to the U.S. being founded on a system that economically, socially, and politically exploits people of color (Bell, 1993; Lawrence, 1995). In schools, racism is portrayed through various ways including curricula, disciplinary practices, tracking and ability grouping, admission practices, choice policies and practices, and funding (Ansolone, 2000; Bell, 1993, 2005; Chapman, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2010; DeCuir and Dixson, 2004; Dickens, 1996; Goodlad, 1984; Green, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Oakes, 1990, 2005; Solorzano, 1997, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005). To bring about social change, CRT scholars work toward bringing awareness and challenging the ways in which White supremacy and racism manifest within schools through colorblind policies and practices while empowering groups of color to unite and resist them.

Counter-storytelling is an essential principle of CRT. Through the use of counter-storytelling, people of color can invalidate “accepted premises or myths” held by Whites while simultaneously re-constructing and validating their own realities (DeCuir and Dixson, 2004, p. 27; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Tate, 1997). Further, counter-storytelling serves as a community-building function and provides mental self-preservation for disenfranchised groups. For students of color who may not be aware of the covert ways that racism and discrimination occur in their schools, encouraging them to learn and reflect on their experiences of oppression as a group and community can aid in building consensus and a common culture of shared understandings as well as prevent and end “mental

violence against themselves” (Tate, 1997, p. 219). More specifically, utilizing the educational experiences of students of color can counter the maintenance of the deficit perspective that blames students of color for their unequal educational outcomes (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

CRT also includes the critique of liberal ideologies such as the notion of colorblindness, the neutrality of the law, meritocracy, and incremental change (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; DeCuir and Dixson, 2004; Gotanda, 1991; Tate, 1997). CRT scholars argue against these liberal ideologies by noting that they do little to address the ways in which racism is embedded in all parts of society. These ideologies, which are based on a premise of meritocracy and neutrality of law, attempt to explain inequity through individual effort or lack of. When examining the academic outcomes of students of color, discrepancies have often been associated to lack of effort or to “cultural deficiencies” associated to groups of color. By arguing that the passage of the Civil Rights has made racism and discrimination in public institutions illegal, liberals and conservatives actively work toward replacing race conscious policies and practices with race neutral policies and practices in all aspects of society in order to achieve equality for all. Instead, these policies help uphold White supremacy by making it difficult to identify and challenge racism and discrimination in society and institutions such as schools.

Another tenant of CRT is the concept of whiteness as property. Harris (1993), a legal CRT scholar contends that through U.S. law, the notion of whiteness has been considered a property interest that functions on three levels: the right of possessions, the right to use, and the right to disposition; all of which can be transferred, used and enjoyed, and kept from others. When applied to education inequity, CRT theorists have described how high quality and rigorous curricula such as the one found in honors, gifted, and college tracks have been mainly used and

enjoyed by Whites (Decuir and Dixson, 2004; Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 2006). This clearly demonstrates how Whites feel that only they should have the right to access and benefit from a high-quality education while legally excluding others through colorblind policies and practices.

Developed by Bell, the interest convergence principle posits that significant progress for groups of color can only be achieved when these goals are aligned with the needs of Whites (Bell, 1992, 2000, 2005; Tate, 1997). After the civil rights passage, the rights and opportunities afforded to Blacks and other groups of color were basic rights that Whites had always enjoyed. Furthermore, these rights and opportunities do not hinder Whites' power in society, and over these groups. When examining the effects of *Brown v. Board of Education*, interest convergence helps us understand how the decision following this case did little to address racial disparities and instead led to the massive dismissal of black teachers and educational leaders, school closures in Black communities, and the emergence of re-segregation through tracking and school choice practices and policies (Bell, 1992, 2000, 2005; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Tate, 1997). Through these efforts, Whites were able to maintain control of schools and of their children's academic outcomes across the country.

Intersectionality, a CRT principle developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, allows critical race researchers to place race and racism at the center of their analysis while viewing the experiences of marginalized groups at their intersection with other forms of oppression such as gender and class discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Critical race scholars recognize the difference between class and racial oppression and argue that class alone cannot account for the intercentricity of racialized oppression that include layers of subordination based on race, gender, class, immigration status, surname, phenotype, accent, and sexuality (Barnes, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). In education, intersectionality allows us to

examine and analyze how the educational system continues to disproportionately discriminate against students of color. For example, when examining academic gains and post high school college and career outcomes, an intersectional perspective can help us explain the connections between racism, discrimination, and privilege within and across racial groups (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013; McCall, 2005).

Although many factors play a key role in tracking, race remains a determining factor in tracking and segregation through the use of choice practices but largely understudied from a critical race perspective and from the very own experiences of students of color. By using Critical Race Theory and the five tenets as a theoretical and analytical framework, we can look more explicitly at race and its connection to colorblind detracking policies and practices like choice. Moreover, race and racism from a CRT perspective are examined through an intersectional framework in order to explain the complexity of power and privilege between and within racial groups in schools.

In addition, the narratives of students of color can help me examine their racialized experiences with choice as a detracking mechanism. Their everyday interactions with school leaders, teachers, and students will allow us to determine whether they are genuinely afforded the opportunity to choose to enroll and stay enrolled in AP courses, or whether choice in course enrollment is nothing more than a colorblind practice upholding White privilege. Students' narratives serve as counter stories that empower historically marginalized groups by allowing their everyday experiences with racism and discrimination, be heard, theorized, and used to bring about social change. Moreover, using students' experiences can help to ensure that students of color are receiving the support and access to a high-quality education that will prepare them for higher education and for the 21st century workforce.

Local Site: Context and Significance

Willow Glen High School (WHS) is a public high school, serving students from 9-12 grade. During the 2017-2018 school year, WHS served about 1,185 students. The school has a diverse group of students from different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds (see Tables 3 and 3.1 for demographic breakdown). Willow Glen High School was chosen as a site due to the minimal attention it has gained from other researchers and because of its location in a liberal community. The discrepancy in attention is largely due to the neighboring districts' racial legal battles and court orders to address student achievement, programming, facilities and educational services. Unlike these schools, WGH has not had a history of desegregation courts orders or consent decrees and instead was one of the first districts in the state to voluntarily institute a desegregation plan. While these actions do not mean that WGH does not struggle with similar racial issues, these events have led to the district and high school to be seen as more progressive when compared to nearby districts. The mere image as being more progressive and located in a liberal and diverse community, provides a window into the daily academic experiences of students of color who attend an academic institution that relies on color blind practices to address racial disparities within its school. While Willow Glen High School prides itself as a multi-cultural community committed to educational excellence for its students, as students' narratives will show, the high school continues to face racial issues within its school. More importantly, the narratives of students and parents of color will help determine whether choice practices uphold detracking and provide minority students with the genuine opportunity to enroll and successfully complete advanced level courses. By examining the racialized academic experiences of students of color and the factors that influence their choice in course enrollment and completion at

Willow Glen High School, we will have a more complex and nuanced understanding of the relationship between choice practices, tracking, and racial inequity.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative research method in order to examine the factors shaping the choices in course enrollment and completion for youth of color attending Willow Glen High School. According to Willow Glen High School, students can enroll in advanced placement courses or stay in general or what the school has labeled as college level courses. While it is stated in the student handbook, that enrollment in advanced courses is a student's choice, there are various factors, both institutional and social, that influence students' decisions to enroll/not enroll in advanced courses. Through semi-structured interviews with several participants, I seek to understand the factors that are influencing students' own educational perceptions, decisions, aspirations, and outcomes, as well as their varied experiences in school and within their classes and its connection to race and class.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the factors influencing students course choices in a detracked school, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six high school girls (three Black female students, one mixed race (Afro-Latina and White) female student, one Latina student, and a West Asian female), and two parents (one female Afro-Latina and a Latino man) of color. By noting the learning experiences of the female focal participants through interviews, as a researcher, I sought to understand how students of color made sense of their everyday academic experiences as it relates to choice in course enrollment at Willow Glen High School. In addition to student interviews, parent interviews served to add to the experiences of students by examining how parents understood the issue of freedom of choice in course enrollment and its

relationship to race and class. To further to explore the phenomenon and the context of Willow Glen High School, I also included data from the school's website and course planner.

The interviews with both students and parents were conducted in Spring 2018 and Spring 2019 with the exception of one student who was interviewed in Spring 2017. Participant interviews lasted one to two hours and most met for a second interview for follow up questions. The interviews were all audio recorded to help write field notes and document evidence pertaining to the research questions. Field notes, transcriptions, and documents were then coded and analyzed thematically through a CRT lens.

General Significance

This study is significant in that it draws attention to the ways in which choice continues to impact the educational outcomes of students of color. When choice is not properly examined and understood from a critical race perspective, it can undermine equity efforts, such as detracking, desegregation, and academic outcomes for students. Ignoring how race, class, and gender intersect with power structures allow the othering of students of color by keeping them from participating in advanced courses that have historically been preserved for White and elite students.

Utilizing the narratives and experiences of students of color as well as their parents, help contextualize the everyday ways in which students' academic choices are shaped by their experiences in school and by their racial and class standing. Students narratives can offer unique knowledge and evaluations on teaching, learning, and schooling, which can serve to counter the dominant groups views, by identifying and challenging power structures that preserve and justify racism and discrimination within schools (Fielding, 2001; Levin, 2000; Mitra, 2001, 2003, 2004; Nieto, 1994; Oldfather, 1995; Riley & Docking, 2004; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). According to

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), the inclusion of voices from people of color are critical when analyzing the educational system and its effect on these groups. Students and parents' voices can help counteract the majoritarian narrative of choice, arguing that this practice benefits all students equally because it is colorblind and does not discriminate according to race (Solórzano & Yosso, 2016). In addition, the dominant narrative further argues that choice allows interested and hardworking students to compete for goods (Bell, 2009; Berends, 2020; Orfield, 2013; Rury, 2020; Welner & Oakes, 1996), or in this case access to AP courses, by working towards this and utilizing their choice to secure a spot in these courses. Moreover, by engaging students through open conversations about injustices in schools, we can get a glimpse into new understandings of educational disparities and equity efforts while simultaneously allowing students to positively influence current and future school policies and practices (Fielding, 2001; Levin, 2000; Mitra, 2001, 2003, 2004; Nieto, 1994; Oldfather, 1995; Riley & Docking, 2004; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000).

Therefore, this study is a close examination of the everyday experiences of students of color who describe their experience with exercising choice and the effects that this colorblind practice has on their academic preparation. Their lived experiences and voices help contextualize the issue of tracking from an intersectional perspective. By analyzing these events, we can understand the ways in which choice conceals institutional and social structures that keep certain groups from accessing courses while also segregating students by race, class, and gender.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the case study by describing the problem, context, background, and research questions guiding this study. The significance and importance of the study is also explained in this chapter.

Chapter 2 begins with a literature review describing the history and current landscape around tracking and the ways that choice promotes inequity for students of color. The theoretical framework used in this study follows this literature review. Critical Race Theory (Bell,2004) offers a lens where race and racism through colorblind practices play out within schools.

Chapter 3 focuses on methods. This study takes a qualitative approach in examining the role of choice in tracking. Through interviews with students and parents, I sought to better understand the experiences of the focal participants. The details and methods used to collect data and better understand the site and participants is also explained.

Chapter 4 focuses on explaining the unequal system that is present within Willow Glen High School for students of color by examining the institutional factors that influence student choice in course selection and completion. Through document analysis of notes and themes from interviews and conversations with students and parents, the following questions were explored:1) What institutional factors (e.g. guidance counselors, teachers, tests, peers, etc.) are influencing students' own academic perceptions, decisions, and outcomes? In addition, this chapter will discuss the underlying racial, socioeconomic, and individual factors influencing focal participants' choice in course selection at Willow Glen High School by exploring the following question: 2) How does the intersection of race and class influence students' academic choices, opportunities, and perceptions of themselves and their peers?

Chapter 5 provides a summary of the findings and concludes with a discussion connecting my assertions and findings to the larger landscape of choice and its connection to tracking from a Critical Race Perspective. The factors influencing academic equity and access for students of color is discussed through the lens of the focal participants and their everyday experiences and interactions at Willow Glen High School.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The role of tracking and its effects on students of color is a complex phenomenon within education. This chapter will explore the history of tracking as well as its relationship to race, class, and choice in course enrollment. Given this context, the literature review provides relevant literature and background information of the history behind tracking as well as the problems associated with these practices for students of color. The main theory guiding this research is Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT provides an important lens for understanding how tracking and thus racism can be upheld through colorblind policies like choice in course assignment by investigating the underlying institutional and social factors that affect the academic decisions and outcomes of students of color.

Introduction

In the United States, public education remains unequal and stratified by race and class (Cooper, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 2010). The resegregation of students in racially mixed schools and the inequity within these schools is partly due to academic tracking (Green, 1999; Goodlad, 1984; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Oakes, 1985; 1986,1990,1992,1995,2005; Orfield, 1993; Orfield & Ee, 2014; Rubin, 2006; Rubin & Noguera, 2004). Tracking is the practice of grouping and assigning students to different courses based on their perceived ability. Secondary schools typically utilize academic tracking, while elementary and some middle schools may practice ability grouping. Ability grouping, a subcategory of tracking, allows students to be grouped within and between subjects based on perceived academic level (Dickens, 1996; Hoffer, 1992; Lleras & Rangel, 2009; Mills, et al., 1976). Ability grouping and tracking are often used interchangeably when describing the institutional grouping of students by ability, however there are marked differences in the practice.

Tracking is mainly practiced in middle and high schools and its focused on assigning students to different classes with different curriculum and different teachers (e.g. IB, Honors, AP, General, Academic, Vocational, etc.), while ability grouping is mainly practiced in elementary schools and involves assigning students to different groups within a classroom and within a particular subject (e.g., remedial, moderate, advanced) (Braddock, 1990;1992; Gamoran 1987; Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Green, 1999; Hallinan, 1994; Oakes, 1985, 2005; Tyson, 2011, 2013). With more awareness of the harmful effects of tracking, there has been a shift from assigning students to rigid tracks that determine all their courses throughout high school to a more subtle and flexible method allowing students to enroll in courses from different tracks. For example, some students may enroll in AP, IB, honors math but the rest of their courses are regular courses (Noguera & Wing, 2006).

Depending on the school, academic tracking can be implemented in a variety of ways (Green, 1999; Oakes, 1985; 2005; Ochoa, 2013; Rubin, 2003, 2006; Rubin & Noguera, 2004; Noguera and Wing, 2006; Wheelock, 1992; Wong, 2018). It may be overt, with counselors, teachers, and school administrators working with students and directly influencing their academic opportunities by shaping their decisions and channeling them towards a class belonging to a specific track (Green, 1999; Oakes, 1985; 2005; Ochoa, 2013; Rubin, 2003, 2006; Rubin & Noguera, 2004; Noguera and Wing 2006). It may be automatic, with the use of objective tests determining a student's high school track placement. It may be covert, with grouping done by teacher and counselors through gate keeping practices involving withholding information about prerequisites and not specifying differences between sections which in turn make it difficult for students to be informed on enrolling for courses outside of their tracked paths. Once students are assigned to a specific track, movement between tracks becomes rare and

nearly impossible for some. More specifically, when students get placed in a low/general/vocational track, it becomes extremely difficult for them to be able to move to a higher-level track even if the student is willing and prepared. Ultimately, students find themselves in homogenous classes that disproportionally funnels low-income and students of color towards vocational or general tracks and wealthier and White students towards college-bound tracks (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Green, 1999; Oakes, 1985; 2005; Rubin, 2003, 2006; Rubin & Noguera, 2004; Wheelock, 1992; Wong, 2018).

A prevalent myth of track placement is that it results from students' own attitudes and decisions towards school and their future. However, many factors lead to disparities in test scores, grades, and classroom performance including access to quality instruction within a school through tracking practices, parental income and support, student expectations shaped by conscious or unconscious bias and/or racism within their schools, as well as access to academic and extracurricular support services within and outside of school (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Oakes, 1985; 2005; Rubin, 2003, 2006; Rubin & Noguera, 2004; Noguera and Wing, 2006; Ochoa, 2013; Wheelock, 1992; Wong, 2018). More importantly, because school performance is associated with social inequity, tracking works to uphold inequity through the segregation of students based on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background and the denial of access to academically rich learning opportunities (Oakes, 1992, 1995; Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Danton, 1997).

Both socioeconomic and institutional factors lead to discrepancies in academic achievement between different racial and socioeconomic groups of students and their disproportionate track placement. By failing to adequately recognize the racial and class-linked factors and how they influence tracking and thus their academic achievement, schools ensure that

tracking and thus inequity continue to thrive (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Green, 1999; Oakes, 1985; 2005; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Rubin, 2003, 2006; Rubin & Noguera, 2004; Wheelock, 1992; Wong, 2018). More importantly, schools who claim to have detracked using choice practices but continue have a two-tiered system that is divided by class and race, illustrate their lack of commitment to detracking their schools and offering all students with equal access to a high-quality education.

The Birth of Standardized Testing and Tracking

During the 1900's the US began to face drastic changes ranging from its increasing diverse population to a more urbanized and industrialized nation (Tyrack, 1974; Trotter, 1984). With a rapidly changing industry, 22 million immigrants from around the world would travel to the U.S. for an opportunity to gain access to the American dream; a well-paying job that would offer them the opportunity to join and benefit from a middle-class status (Patton & Mondale, 2001). However, in order to assimilate and determine the roles of these new immigrants, political and school leaders found it critical to use education but more specifically academic tracking, IQ testing, and other standardized tests to prepare students for their expected roles in society (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Donelan, Neal, & Jones, 1994; Oaks, 2005; Patton & Mondale, 2001; Welch, 1998) .

During the 1920's, a new group of progressive educators adopted Frederick Taylor's organizational efficiency models in education by changing the purpose and structure of schooling to meet the economic needs of an industrialized society (Welch, 1998). One of these educators was known as Ellwood P. Cubberley, a former teacher who openly criticized the education system as being outdated and inefficient for providing all students with the same type of college preparatory education (Patton & Mondale, 2001). Cubberley proposed that only the

brightest children, whom he believed were more valuable to the nation, should be educated and trained for high-skilled positions in society (Cubberly, 1909; Patton & Mondale, 2001). As department head of the College of Education at Stanford University, Cubberley trained educational administrators on the science of school management, by applying business principles that focused on maximizing efficiency and resources by limiting academic curriculum and increasing technical training through a separate and differentiated education (Cubberly, 1909; Patton & Mondale, 2001; Welch, 1998). Incorporating the ideas of Cubberley, educators transformed the education system by introducing career/vocational tracking which offered college bound curriculum to the “brightest students” while others received an education that reflected their expected positions in society (Cubberly, 1909; Patton & Mondale, 2001). More specifically, students would be divided into two groups: one group that was college bound and another that led students into low-skilled and low-wage jobs. Efficiency proposals that labeled students as bright, included discriminatory views and tactics that forced Blacks, Asians, Mexicans, and Southern and Eastern Europeans who were of darker skin, into poverty. Lack of equity in access to academic education was justified by the economic gains and political values of white conservatives. More specifically, neo-classical economic assumptions regarding inequity in academic curriculum and training in high skilled jobs were justified by inequities in students’ ability and intelligence which was determined as genetically fixed during this time period (Cubberly, 1909; Terman, Dickson, Sutherland, Franzen, Tupper & Fernald, 1922).

Nonetheless, these educators resorted to a test developed to measure students’ intelligence. Though the IQ test was developed in France, it was greatly promoted by a colleague of Cubberley’s at Stanford University; an American psychologist named Lewis Terman (Patton & Mondale, 2001). Terman believed that IQ testing could help schools and society by gaining a

greater understanding of student's abilities and offering them an education that matched their aptitude (Donelan, Neal, & Jones, 1994; Terman et al.,1922). In a study examining academic tracking in U.S. schools, Findley and Brian (1970) found that 83% of school districts arranged students based on IQ test and achievement. However, the use, application, and interpretations of IQ tests, cognitive tests, and standardized tests were largely based on race and ethnic views.

During the WWI era, Terman and other psychologists would run the IQ test on 1.7 million US army recruits and assign them to different level positions within the army (Patton & Mondale, 2001). Scores derived from highly subjective and culturally biased word and picture problems determined whether a man would be assigned to a dangerous position such as the trenches or to an office job at the white house (Patton & Mondale, 2001). Terman and his colleagues concluded that the average age of the army recruits was about 13 years and asserted that ethnicity influenced intelligence. To confirm an ethnic groups intelligence, value, and their capacity to learn, test scores from each ethnic group would be collected and ordered from the brightest to the least intelligent (Patton & Mondale, 2001). When compared to White Anglo-Saxon middle class groups, groups such as African Americans, Native Americans, Mexicans, and immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe would be considered intellectually inferior and as a result would be placed in the lowest ranks that were more susceptible to death (Terman et al.,1922). At the same time, pseudo and racist scientific theories about intelligence such as social Darwinism were beginning to influence the process of educating students. Ideas from social Darwinism argued that the biological makeup of non-White and Southern and Eastern Europeans groups were the cause of their inferior characteristics (Ladson-Billings, & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997; Terman et al.,1922). In his book *Intelligence Tests and School Reorganization*, Terman promoted the racist and false narrative that American Indians, Mexicans, and Blacks'

inability to master abstract thought and “dullness seemed to be racial” and recommended segregating them into distinct classes that prepared them to be efficient workers (Terman, et al., 1922). Following Terman’s racially biased logic, changing the environments through education could not change their biological makeup or intelligence, thus segregating them and providing them with a differentiated education was scientifically justified (Wong, 2018; Tyack, 1974). These biased beliefs of students of color would forever influence their academic experiences by justifying segregation in schools by tracking these students into vocational courses, as well as limiting their access to advanced courses that prepared them for college or higher paid careers (Tyack, 1974).

Scholars have questioned the appropriate use of standardized testing and scores for academic placement due to the inconsistencies of content, score reliability, fairness and generalizations of tests, and historical racial and class biases embedded within these tests (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Moran, 2001; Oaks, 2005). For example, research suggests that students from low-income and minority backgrounds are more likely to perform lower or fail standardized tests when compared to White middle-income students (Wong, 2018). These tests are often drafted in ways that require all students to hold a White middle-class background. Moreover, Oakes (2005) found a range of issues that includes mislabeling, inequitable treatment, and lack of access to high quality teachers as the consequences of standardized tests.

The effects of tracking and ability grouping

School Re-segregation

When examining the issue of school segregation, practices like academic tracking, have furthered the issue by creating a dual system within schools (Oakes, 2005). One of the most consistent impacts of tracking and ability grouping has been the separation of students by race,

ethnicity, and social class (Alexandre & McDill, 1976; Oakes, 2005; Vanfossen et al., 1987). More specifically, when students are separated into academic groups based on ability, the outcomes of tracking will illustrate a strong correlation between tracking, race, and socioeconomic status (Alexandre & McDill, 1976; Oakes, 2005; Vanfossen et al., 1987).

In her study on 25 schools, Oakes (2005) found a strong correlation between student's socioeconomic positions, ethnicity, and track level. From the 25 schools, six schools that were racially mixed showed a strong correlation between ethnicity and tracking level in math and English classes. While the population of White students in the six schools averaged to about 50%, high tracked English classes were made up by 62% of White students. Not only were there a significant number of White students in high tracked classes but their percentage was higher than their total population. This racial pattern was observed in 14 out of 18 classes, with a large group of Whites in the high track classes and most minority groups in the low track/remedial classes. This pattern was also observed in the math courses. Nonetheless, in many high minority schools, students who were considered low-income were largely placed in low track classes. Surprisingly, in schools where minority students were the majority in the school population, White students still outnumbered minority students in high track courses.

Like Oakes, Tach and Farkas (2006) also found that large groups of minority and low-income students were largely placed in lower-level groups when compared to high income White and Asian students. The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of reading ability grouping in kindergarten and first grade using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study along with predictors of placement (students test scores, gender, race/ethnicity, social class, age, and teacher judged learning behavior). Results showed that by the end of first grade, African American, Hispanic, American Indian, lower SES and male students who were placed in lower-

level groups, would have lower test scores, and lower learning related behavior scores than White, Asian, higher SES, and female students who were not placed in these groups. However, segregation is not the only outcome of tracking or ability grouping. Students also face inequalities to obtaining an education from high quality teachers.

Access to Quality Teachers

With the use of tracking and ability grouping, research shows that teachers are also tracked to teach only specific types of students (Hoffer, 1992; Oakes, 1990). Teacher placement is based on teacher certification, years of experience and subject knowledge on the course they are teaching. Some schools do not follow these methods and instead have teachers compete for high track classes or for principals to use high track assignment as a reward and low track assignment as a punishment (Oakes, 1990). Such political procedures work against low track students, because these students are the ones who will be placed with teachers who are the least prepared and least qualified (Oakes, 1990; Betts & Shkolnik, 2000).

Oakes (1990) examined the manner in which US schools distribute academic opportunities in math and science to students from various backgrounds. Results showed that participation and achievement in these subjects by women, minority students, and low-income students were disproportionately low when compared to other groups. Some of the major reasons for students' low participation and achievement were related to teachers and their experience, knowledge, and certification and the SES of the total student population in the schools. Major differences were observed in teaching qualification in math and science between track levels. Middle and high school students who were placed in lower tracks or general math courses would be taught by teachers who were less qualified than teachers in the higher tracks. These teachers had less teaching experience, were less likely to be certified, were less likely to hold degrees in

these subjects, and less often reported themselves to be master teachers when compared to high track teachers.

Additionally, studies have illustrated the unequal access to experienced teachers for students attending schools that practice ability grouping. In a study done by Betts and Shkolnik (2000), results indicated a difference in teacher education between schools that practiced ability grouping versus non-grouped schools. Students in advanced courses had teachers with 20+ years of experience when compared to teachers in low track classes who had 12 years of teaching experience. When compared to schools that did not practice tracking, students who were in heterogeneous classrooms had teachers with an average of 19 years teaching experience. The effects go beyond access to quality teachers but also receive different expectations and a different type of education from teachers in different tracks and ability-based courses.

Different Expectations

While the level of tracking can impact the type of education a child receives, studies reveal that the educational composition of tracking may shape and uphold biased academic expectations that teachers, counselors, and administrators hold for different students in different tracks (Ansalone, 2000; Houtte & Demanet, 2012; Kelly & Carbonado, 2012; Martinez, 2010; Oakes, 1985, 1986, 1990, 1992, 1995, 1997, 2005; Oakes, & Guiton, 1995; Ochoa, 2013; Rosenbaum, 1976). Due to academic track placement and students' non-academic characteristics, teachers and counselors may expect more or less from different students and treat them as such. Teachers' expectations and behaviors can significantly impact students' academic achievement and outcomes due to their positions as stakeholders. They can determine what courses students are able to enroll in and successfully complete and as later discussed, can influence students' self-views.

Due to the significant weight placed on teacher and counselor recommendation, their beliefs and expectations are critical when exploring academic placement of students of color. Depending on the track a student is placed in and on teacher and/or counselor biases, they can determine students' placement without students' knowledge or by directly influencing students and parent's decision when enrolling in courses (Oakes, 1996, 2005; Rosenbaum, 1976; Yonezawa, 2000; Yonezawa & Oakes, 1999). For example, Cicourcel and Kitsuse (1963) found that aside from academic measures, teachers also used non-academic characteristics in their recommendation practices; such factors included student appearance, language, behavior, dress, and potential. More importantly, Oakes and Guiton (1995) found that teachers believed student ability, motivation, and aspirations were fixed once they got to high school and certain groups of students were associated with particular academic tracks and opportunities. For example, lower income and students of color were often thought of as having cultural deficits that resulted in them being unmotivated, lazy, noncompetitive, anti-intellectual, and coming from a disorganized family (Oakes, 1986). Hence, existential presumptions and the issue of subjectivity, reliability, accuracy, and fairness are important to note when considering teacher decision-making and how their biases shape student recommendation for track and ability group placement (Oakes, 2005; Rosenbaum, 1976).

Houtte and Demanet (2012) conducted a study examining teacher's evaluations of high school students based on their cognitive capacity, efforts in class, and diligence in doing homework in each track. They also analyzed whether teachers' perceptions were also shaped by students' background characteristics, students' resistance to school, or by the labels of students in different tracks. Using multi-level analysis on students' self-reports and teacher evaluations, results showed that teachers held more negative perceptions and lower expectations of students

in vocational programs, who were primarily from low-income backgrounds and of color, when compared to teachers from academic programs who mainly taught affluent and White students. Teachers described students from lower tracks as less able and careless about doing homework due to students' social and cognitive characteristics and their "anti-school attitudes." More specifically, students in academic programs were perceived by their teachers as more capable due to their assumed cognitive capacity when compared to students from vocational tracks. Furthermore, students' cognitive capacity was associated to their ability, gender, race, and SES. As a result, students in vocational programs which consisted of lower SES and male students of color were perceived as less capable due to the mentioned characteristics. In addition to students' background characteristics teachers also held more negative attitudes and lower expectation of males and of migrant students in vocational programs.

Similarly, Oakes (1986, 2005) found that teacher expectations varied by track level. Teachers from tracked English and math classes were interviewed and asked about what they expected their students to learn from their classes. Amongst their responses, teachers of high track classes included things such as: evaluating, analyzing, researching, scientific reasoning, self-reliance, make personal decisions, think critically, creativity, individual interpretation of material, staying curious, and so on. In contrast, low track teachers mentioned that they wanted their students to develop: respect for others, self-discipline, respecting a teacher's position, punctuality, honesty, personal hygiene, how fill out forms, understanding basic words to obtain and maintain a job, business-oriented skills, practical math skills, following directions, good work habits, and life skills. These responses illustrated that teachers' expectations often included students learning specific behaviors and attitudes that were not directly related to the subject

areas. Thus, teachers of high track classes held higher expectations for students than low track teachers due their biases of students race, class, ses, gender and other non-academic traits.

In addition, Kelly and Carbonado (2012) conducted a study examining high school teachers' educational attainment of their students from different tracks. By utilizing data from NELS, a nationally longitudinal survey from the graduating class of 1992, the researchers conducted logistic regression analyses on 14,720 teacher reports of 8,868 students (5,852 of those students had reports from two of their teachers) and found a significant effect of tracking level on teacher expectations of students. More specifically, they found differences in teacher expectations held for the same student in each of his/her tracked classes (regular, academic, advanced). When looking at how tracking affects student and teacher expectations of college attendance, they found that overall, 85% of students regardless of track level (general, academic, and advanced) expected to attend college, while only 60.1% of their teachers believed that their students would attend college. For both students and teachers, expectations were largely influenced by track level. Teachers from courses in the advanced track were more likely to report that their students would attend college (90%) when compared to the academic (65.79%) and regular track (59.64%). A large number of students who took courses in this track also had higher expectations of attending college when compared to the academic (88.43%) and regular track (40.36%). While track level had a significant effect on teacher expectations, they were also shaped by grades, test scores, engagement, students' own expectations, ses, gender, race, and ethnicity. Interestingly enough when a student was placed in low track courses their teacher in that course had lower expectations of them than their teachers from high track courses. The higher the level or track of the course the more likely their teachers would respond positively to them (1.29 factor increase for the academic track courses and a 1.54 factor increase in the honors

course track.) This shows that tracking conditions further shaped teachers' expectations not only for students with a less certain academic course, but even when students saw themselves as likely to go on to college.

Different Education, Different Opportunities

While people may think that all children and youth learn the same information in the same way per grade level, research has illustrated that as a result of tracking and ability grouping students receive differentiated curricula that vary both in the content and method of instruction (Goodlad, 1984; Oakes, 2005). Consequently, these strategies impact the opportunity for students to learn and to further progress academically and socially by limiting the amount of information and the type of knowledge they receive (Goodlad, 1984; Oakes, 2005). Amongst all the literature, research from Oakes (2005) and Goodlad (1984) have specifically illustrated the various ways in which students are taught, the type of knowledge they obtain, and the education they are denied due to their track or ability group level.

As part of her 1987 study, Oakes (2005) found major differences in how and what students were taught and what they learned in the 299 English and math classes for each track level. Additionally, Oakes found large differences in the types of information each track had access to. One of the various differences between high track classes and low track courses was the exposure to specific material that would serve as preparation for college and universities. For example, students who were placed in high track English courses would be exposed to rich curriculum that included reading classical and modern literature. Instructors in these classes had students learn about the historical development of these literatures, the types of genres (essays, short stories, poetry, novels), and to evaluate literacy elements (metaphoric language, irony, symbolism). These students also learned and were expected to engage in expository writing

including thematic and book reports. Students were also expected to learn and broaden their use of vocabulary words that would most likely be in the SAT. Additionally, students would continue to prepare for the SAT by getting exposure to reading comprehension material and using this material as practice guides. Teachers in these tracks also reported that their students were engaged in material that required critical thinking, making generalizations, drawing conclusions, problem solving, and evaluating literature.

In contrast, students placed in low track English classes did not learn about classic or modern literatures but instead read short young-adult fiction novels with themes that served no educational purpose other than entertainment. These novels were not challenging enough due to their low level of difficulty. In addition, students were taught reading skills through the use of workbooks, reading texts, and kits. As part of their writing assignments, students wrote short narrative paragraphs and learned the usage of proper English. Functional literacy skills such as learning to fill out forms and job applications was also greatly emphasized in these lower tracks. These tracks also required simple memory assignments or comprehension. Interestingly enough, students from average tracks learned more information than students placed in low track courses. While teachers said the average classes were in between high and low tracks, Oakes found that the knowledge in these tracks were very similar to high tracks but less intensive as high tracks. Thus, their education was not in the middle but almost exactly the same as high track students. The same pattern would be observed in math classes.

Similar to the track patterns in English classes, students from all three tracks would receive a differentiated education in math courses. The knowledge that high track students gained from their math classes was regarded as more valuable when compared to the material that students learned in other math tracks. The material was also considered essential for

admissions to a university. Topics covered in high track classes included mathematical ideas as well as computational techniques. Thus, students learned things such as the numeration systems, probability, mathematical paradigms, and statistics along with an increase of knowledge of math skills at the higher grades. Unlike high tracks that offered students higher thinking skills as they progressed through high school, low track math classes offered the same level of knowledge and skills to students every year. In low track math classes, students' knowledge was not progressing, and their math education would not include higher quality math skills that their peers in high track courses obtained. Instead, students in low track courses continued to learn basic computational and arithmetic facts such as multiplication, division, subtraction and so on. They were also taught simple measurement skills and how to calculate percentages and wages. While many of these basic skills would be useful for everyday use it would not be the type of knowledge that was as valued or essential by educators and by universities. In addition to the differentiated content between tracks, students would receive different opportunities to learn.

Oakes also found classroom characteristics that emerged as strong school-based determinants of student learning. These classroom characteristics comprised of conditions such as the time spent on actual instruction, how students used this time, and the quality of instruction. Oakes would again compare tracked English and math classes from the same sample used in Goodlad's study. From all the schools studied, high and low track classes consumed the same amount of time. However, when looking at the actual time spent on instruction, time between tracks varied. Teachers in high track courses reported spending about 82% of class time on instruction whereas teachers from low track classes spent 67%. Another observation was made on behavior routines, and social activities. Additionally, students who were off task ranged from 4% in low track classes to 2% in high track classes. While results were small, students in low

track courses receive less time for learning and more students off task than in high track classes. Once more, students from high tracks seem to benefit from the type of instruction they receive in high tracks than low tracks. As a result, students' learning, and academic achievement was based on their academic track or ability group.

Academic Achievement

While proponents argue that tracking promotes all students' academic achievement, research shows that not all student benefit from tracking. Instead, studies have found that one group is more likely to benefit from being placed in a homogeneous group. Students placed in higher tracks or in higher level groups are more likely to benefit when compared to students in low tracks or lower-level groups (Ansolone, 2000; Gamoran, 1987; Hoffer, 1992; Lleras and Rangel, 2009; Oakes, 2005; Pallas, Entwisle, Alexander, & Stluka, 1994). Researchers further argue that grouping not only improves the cognitive achievement of students placed in high ability groups but does so at the expense of students who are placed in average and low ability groups (Ansolone, 2000; Gamoran, 1987; Hoffer, 1992; Lleras and Rangel, 2009; Oakes, 2005; Pallas, Entwisle, Alexander, & Stluka, 1994).

Lleras and Rangel's (2009) study analyzed the influence of ability grouping on reading achievement gains for African Americans and Hispanic elementary school children. Using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, results showed that African American students and Hispanic students who were placed in lower reading groups had significant lower achievement gains than high ability students. Lower achievement gains resulted from Latino and African American students being grouped and placed in lower reading groups that learned less from kindergarten to third grade when compared to non-grouped students. While students in lower ability reading groups received a lower level of education, students placed in higher ability

reading groups gained higher reading levels when compared to non-grouped students. By third grade African American and Latino students placed in low ability reading groups scored .23 below the standard deviation when compared to non-grouped students. In contrast, high level reading groups scored .21 above the standard deviation when compared to non-grouped students. Therefore, within the first few years of school, students placed in higher level groups learned more than African and Latino students who were in both low ability groups and a homogeneous classroom.

In a study done by Pallas, Entwisle, Alexander, and Stluka (1994) the effects of first grade reading group placement on instructional, social, and institutional outcomes were examined. Using data from the Beginning School Study, results showed that when students with similar levels of academic performance and social backgrounds were placed in different level reading groups, students who were placed in the higher-level groups learned more and received higher grades than the lower ranked group. Additionally, students who were placed in the higher ranked reading groups were perceived by their teachers and parents as more competent than students from lower ranked groups with similar backgrounds.

Likewise, Hoffer's (1992) study investigated the effects of ability grouping on cognitive achievement in math and science for middle school students. Data was collected from the LSAY was used to compare students' outcomes in grouped and non-grouped schools. Results demonstrated that when student achievement growth was compared between 7th-9th grade grouped and non-grouped students, students placed in high ability groups learned more than students in low ability and heterogenous groups. Although students in both grouped and non-grouped schools start at about the same ability level, within a year after being assigned to different ability groups, a difference of 1.5 standard deviations between the high and low ability groups was

observed. When combining the effects that result from unequal access to a high-quality education, experienced teachers, and positive interactions with teachers, some students may begin to internalize the views from school and slowly withdraw from school.

Effects of Tracking on Self-perception, Behavior, and Dropout

Research exploring the effects of tracking and ability grouping on students' self-concept and other aspects of affective development had been almost non-existent until the late 20th century. Studies during this period began to show the detrimental effects of tracking and grouping students' self-perception, self-esteem, behavior and ultimately on their chances of graduating (Kelly, 1975). The outcomes of researcher such as Hargreaves, Schafer and Olexa, and Stinchcombe, have illustrated that when students are placed in non-college tracks, they begin to show negative academic behavior such as low academic achievement, low extracurricular participation, school misbehavior, dropout and delinquency (Kelly, 1975). Many more researchers would find a strong correlation between track level memberships and certain kinds of attitudes and behaviors (Braddock and Slavin, 1992; Gamoran and Mare, 1989; Kelly, 1975; Oakes, 2005).

By administering a questionnaire to 1,227 high school sophomore males and collecting data from transcripts and juvenile courts, Kelly (1975) tested whether tracking affects a student's self-esteem and increases behavioral outcomes such as school failure and delinquency. Results demonstrated a strong correlation between track position and self-esteem, failure, delinquency and dropping out. Additionally, track position was also related to extracurricular participation. When compared to college-bound males, students placed in the non-college tracks showed lower level of self-esteem, were more likely to have a history of failure, dropping out and issues with

the juvenile system. These students were also less likely to be involved in extracurricular activities when compared to college-bound males.

Additionally, Braddock and Slavin (1992), would further add to research in this field. In their study, students in the low track were reported having a lower self-esteem than low achieving students in mixed ability classes. Students expressed that placement in the low track made them feel inferior and worthless. Additionally, students in these tracks also reported feelings of having little to no control of their fate when compared to untracked students with similar backgrounds. For students placed in high and middle level courses, there were no significant differences between both groups. Students in both of these groups showed higher levels of self-esteem.

Like Braddock and Slavin, Oakes (2005) found similar results from students. Oakes discovered that students' attitudes, views of themselves and future plans were highly correlated to track level. Results showed that students placed in high level courses had higher aspirations, positive academic and general self-concepts, when compared to other students from different tracks. Unlike their high track peer, students in low tracked courses had more negative views about themselves academically and generally and held the lowest academic expectations for themselves. The experience of constantly being placed in low tracks has many effects other than low self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness. Students in low tracks are also less likely to complete their education.

In 1989, Gamoran and Mare examined how tracking affects achievement in math and graduation rates for high school students. Using data from the High School and Beyond Survey, Gamoran and Mare found that tracking widened the gap in math achievement and the probability of graduating between students from high and low SES backgrounds. Students in the college

track not only gained higher math scores but were also 10% more likely to graduate than non-college tracks. Students SES also affected graduation rates and accounted for 13.7% of the association between tracks and the probability of graduating. Thus, students from middle to high SES groups do not only gain access to college tracks but also graduate at higher rates than students from the non-college tracks who are mainly from low SES backgrounds. The authors conclude that academic achievement and graduation rates would be higher if all students were enrolled in a college preparatory program but lower if placed in a non-college track.

Legal Challenges to Tracking

Following WWII, racial awareness and activism began to influence litigation cases against racial segregation and inequities in education and other parts of society (Green, 1999). In the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case, the United States Supreme Court declared that the separate but equal doctrine was unconstitutional on the basis that segregated schools violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (Bell, 1992; *Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). By restricting the power that states and local school boards had in using race as a means to classify students, the Supreme Court made public education an equal opportunity for all (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). *Brown* signaled the end of *de jure* segregation but did not prohibit the grouping of students within schools based on perceived ability. As long as schools did not use race as a factor to determine students' ability and their academic track, schools could use covert and thus colorblind tactics to segregate and deny students of color similar opportunities as White children. Nevertheless, the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* was critical for setting a legal framework for litigation against segregation practices, like academic tracking (Green, 1999; Wong, 2018).

Unlike *Brown*, which was heard and decided on in the Supreme court, cases involving academic tracking have only been heard in lower courts. One of the main reasons is due to its permissibility because of its assumed race, gender-, and class-blind approach. However, federal courts have reviewed and developed a general doctrine to evaluate the legality of tracking practices for students of color through the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteen Amendment, past intentional discrimination, the Student Assignment in Elementary and Secondary Schools, and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Welner & Oakes, 1996; Wong, 2018). These legal doctrines and principles were critical for contesting the practice of academic tracking and ability grouping in k-12 in future cases.

During the 1960's and 1970's cases such as *Hobson v. Hansen* (1967), *Moses v. Washington Parish School Board* (1972), and *McNeal v. Tate County School District* (1975) challenged tracking policies and practices and received mixed results from the courts. In *Hobson v. Hansen* (1967), the first case addressing tracking in public schools, plaintiffs alleged that Washington D.C. school district perpetuated racial segregation in elementary and secondary schools through its four-track system. Using a combination of standardized tests and teacher recommendations, Black students were disproportionately assigned to vocational and lower tracks while their White peers were largely represented in the higher and pre-college tracks. According to Superintendent Carl Hansen, student assignment was solely based on their perceived abilities and academic needs and not on race. Using the Equal Protection Clause analysis, the district court found that the tracking system violated Black students' rights to an equal education through a tracking system that placed them in vocational and lower academic tracks at a significantly higher rate than Whites, resulting in a segregated school (Green, 1999). Secondly, Black children assigned to lower academic tracks received an inadequate education

that prepared them for blue collar positions and stigmatized them as intellectually inferior. The Washington D.C. school district also established a rigid tracking system, preventing movement from lower to higher tracks and condemning Black students to an inferior academic status at an early age. More importantly, rather than finding an intent to segregate, Judge Wright found the tracking system unconstitutional due to its disparate impact on Black students.

Similarly, In the *Moses v. Washington Parish School Board (1972)*, Washington Parish in Louisiana operated a segregated education system until 1965, when the school system was ordered to desegregate. Subsequently, the school board decided to implement a tracking system using IQ tests to assign students to different tracks. Plaintiffs claimed that segregation resulted from the use of IQ testing that undermined the academic abilities of Black students who were previously educated in segregated schools. Furthermore, the use of IQ tests led to a higher disadvantage for Black students when compared to white students who had received a superior education. The Fifth Circuit Court agreed with the plaintiffs and ordered the school district to discontinue the use of its tracking system on the grounds it violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment by utilizing IQ tests that excessively appointed Black students to lower tracks when compared to White students (Green, 1999).

The use of IQ testing in tracking was once again tackled in *McNeal v. Tate County School District (1975)*. In *McNeal v. Tate County School District*, the court ruled that use of IQ testing in student placement was unlawful due to school not having remedied the results of de jure segregation by achieving unitary status. According to the court, this provision guarantees that the injuries and stigmas that resulted from previous segregation efforts were no longer present and did not influence current methods of assignment in schools. As a result, the Fifth Circuit upheld the validity of tracking as a district policy, by arguing that tracking practices alone

are a non-racial method of student assignment and when implemented in a unitary system, where the school district can demonstrate its unequal assignment is not based on previous segregation or can remedy such result through better educational opportunities, it is constitutionally permissible. In the court's view, tracking was supported by meritocratic principles, in which the highly motivated students would work hard to be placed in the high tracks and the less motivated and slower students would be fall into the lower tracks. When compared to previous cases, the Fifth Circuits decision established that racial segregation within schools was permissible under the grounds that it was not influenced by previous overt practices but a result of de facto outcomes. More importantly, the court declared that any resulting segregation was neither unconstitutional nor the districts responsibility to address if the appropriate placement procedures were implemented and there was no evidence of intentionality (*McNeal v. Tate County School District, 1975*).

Following the decision in the *McNeal* case as well as the Supreme Court's decision in *Washington v. Davis (1976)*, a case focused on discrimination in employment, the courts modified the application of the Equal Protection Clause so that disproportionate impact on different racial groups alone does not make a law or practice unconstitutional. Instead, a finding of discrimination needs to be followed with substantial evidence of discriminatory intent (Green, 1999; Wong, 2018). These changes came because more conservative court system during the Reagan and Bush administration that retreated from issuing desegregation orders and thus diminishing equal access and equal educational opportunities for people of color.

This new framework was adopted in the 1985 *Georgia State Conference of Branches of NAACP v. State of Georgia*, where the case against tracking was argued before the Eleventh Circuit of Court of Appeals (Bell, 1992). In this case, the National Association for the

Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) filed a civil rights class action suit on behalf of Black children in several Georgia counties alleging that tracking practices restricted the educational opportunities of Black children. Similar to *McNeal v. Tate County School District (1975)*, the Third Circuit Court was in favor of the state of Georgia, arguing that ability tracking did not violate the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteen Amendment, the Equal Education Opportunity Act of 1974 or Title VI of the Civil rights of 1974. Not only did the plaintiffs failed to provide evidence supporting that segregation in Georgia's public schools was intentional or that it was the result of past discriminatory practices, but the court determined that tracking and their placement methods were educationally appropriate (*Georgia State Conference of Branches of NAACP v. State of Georgia, 1985*).

With the appointment of William Jefferson Clinton in 1993, a backlog of civil right cases in education were taken up by the courts. The Clinton administration, led by the Justice Department's new Assistant Attorney General for civil rights, Patrick Deval, led an attack on academic tracking, alleging that tracking was the segregating mechanism of the 90's (Green, 1999). Deval was determined to challenge tracking cases under the laws and rulings that prohibit school segregation. As a result, during the mid 1990's, cases involving tracking focused on showing the effects of intentional discrimination.

For example, in *People Who Care v. Rockford Board of Education (1994)*, plaintiffs claimed that the Illinois school district engaged in systematic discrimination through tracking mechanisms. To demonstrate the discriminatory intent and effects of tracking on lower tracks and students of color, expert witness, Jeannie Oaks, supplied the court with testimonies, curriculum guides, district reports, instructions, forms, enrollment statistics, standardized test scores, teacher recommendations for course enrollment, and the district's discovery responses

(*People Who Care v. Rockford Board of Education*, 1994; Welner & Oakes, 1996). Through data collection and analysis, Oakes demonstrated that the placement methods utilized by the school district “skewed enrollments in favor of Whites over and above that which can be explained by measured achievement” (Welner & Oakes, 1996, p.463). On this basis, the court ordered the elimination of ability grouping or tracking in Rockford schools (Green, 1999; *People Who Care v. Rockford Board of Education*, 1994; Welner & Oakes, 1996).

Following *People Who Care v. Rockford Board of Education* (1994), three other cases, *Vazquez v. San Jose Unified School District* (1994), *Simmons on Behalf of Simmons v. Hooks* (1994), *Coalition to Save Our Children v. State Board of Education* (1995), similar suit by contested tracking and ability grouping through the use of expert witnesses and data analysis that illustrated the intentional and harmful effects of tracking. Unlike *People Who Care*, the data presented was more comprehensive and included short and longitudinal data of students’ enrollment and performance, academic preparation and other characteristics of teachers in each track, and the impact of track placement on achievement gains of students (Welner & Oakes, 1996). For example, in *Coalition to Save Our Children v. State Board of Education* (1995), expert witness illustrated how students placed in a non-advanced math class for a year can be expected to score more than sixty-nine points lower on the math section of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills than a similarly achieving student placed in an advanced math class (Welner & Oakes, 1996). The quality and quantity of data convinced the courts that these school districts replaced their previous discriminatory system with another that primarily targeted and negatively affected the academic achievement and opportunities of Latino and African American, as well as other students of color, which led to the legal dismantling of tracking and ability grouping in these schools.

While these cases show the potential to dismantle tracking through the legal system, tracking continues to be practiced in many schools across the country, affecting the academic and social outcomes of students of color (Welner & Oakes, 1996). To continue fighting against tracking practices and its negative effects, it is critical to not only bring awareness to these issues but also hold schools legally accountable in courts. When challenging tracking and ability grouping in k-12 schools, Welner and Oakes (1996), argue that evidence of discrimination on current generations must go beyond the mere outcomes of tracking but stress on the ongoing and active discrimination students are facing through these practices (Welner & Oakes, 1996). More importantly, by stressing that tracking is an ineffectual and discriminatory pedagogical practice through broad and comprehensive evidence, schools can be forced to address this practice as well as its effects by detracking their schools. While access to an education is not a fundamental right, the Supreme Court has left the door open for litigation under a fundamental right to a minimally adequate education which is likely violated by tracking and ability grouping because it deprives students of color, who are disproportionately placed in lower tracks, of a minimum base of knowledge and skills in ways that are directly and indirectly related to academic motivation and achievement. Considering these two strategies may provide a more effective litigation strategy for plaintiffs who require a court mandate.

The Role of choice in Desegregation and Detracking Schools

After the legal prohibition of de jure segregation, choice practices became popular across the South and in Northern and Western school districts (Rury, 2020; Wong, 2018). The foundational claim behind choice is that it provides all students and parents the autonomy to select their own schools, courses, and thus academic opportunities to work towards their own future goals (Rury, 2020; Welner & Oakes, 1996). In addition, advocates argue that choice

serves as the solution for educational inequities by creating competition between schools. The competition for students and funding compels schools to develop diverse and innovative changes in learning, curriculum, and instruction, resulting in improved learning outcomes for students (Berends, 2020; Orfield, 2013; Rury, 2020). According to educational leaders, the colorblind lens in choice policies and practices allow them to achieve equitable results based on the premise that it allows for an “unbiased and fair” process for determining access in school and track assignment (Bell, 2009).

While these concepts seem promising, they have shown to be problematic due to the assumption that a colorblind approach in choice, can solely address raced-based and social educational inequities (Bell, 2009). As research has shown, when adopting a colorblind approach as a solution for racial academic inequities, results in access and achievement often fall disproportionately along racial and class lines (Bell, 2009; Berends, 2020; Orfield, 2013; Rury, 2020; VanDunk & Dickman, 2003). More importantly, when examining the historical establishment of choice policies and practices, the intentions behind their use, and its true beneficiaries, race and racism is often a driving factor (Berends, 2020; Orfield, 2013; Rury, 2020, Wong, 2018).

The following section will discuss school choice and its relevance to detracking efforts. Due to limited research examining the use of choice as a detracking effort, the following section will focus on school choice as well as how it shaped detracking efforts. Examining the adoption of choice after *Brown*, is critical for understanding the intentions and effects that choice policies and practices have for within school segregation and inequity for students of color. More importantly, school choice serves as the foundation for understanding why schools adopt choice

practices in detracking their courses, as well as how this colorblind approach perpetuates a racially divided and unequal schooling for students of color.

The use of choice has been present in American schooling since the early 1900's, however it was not until after WWII, when migration into cities among Black, Latino, and other minority groups furthered the practice (Rury, 2020). With the migration of minority groups into urban areas, racial inequities became apparent in schools and communities, causing backlash from the minority groups who compelled education and government officials to examine and address the inequities within their communities (Rury, 2020). In addition to President Johnson mandating schools to desegregate at deliberate speed, Civil Rights leaders issued legal proceedings, pressuring schools to comply with the *Brown* decision and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Orfield, 2013; Rury, 2020). For example, in the 1968 *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* case, Dr. Calvin Green, president of the New Kent county NAACP and father of three school-age sons, filed suit to compel the New Kent School Board to integrate the county's schools through more direct methods other than freedom-of-school choice plans. Through the use of freedom of choice plans, the district allowed White families to refuse integration by staying enrolled in their neighborhood schools and not enroll in Black majority or integrated schools. The case led to the Supreme Court mandating racially balanced schools through affirmation action remedies in order to achieve racially mixed schools (Rossell, 1995). *Green* was later followed by *Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education (1969)*, which ended delayed desegregation plans. However, it was not until the *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education in 1971*, where the Supreme Court addressed the issue of permissible remedies in desegregation plans. In the *Swann* case, the courts approved mandatory busing as a remedy to residential based school segregation. For Northern states, the 1973 *Keyes*

v. School District No. 1 Supreme Court decision mandated desegregation in northern districts, who did not have previous laws mandating segregated schools (Rossell, 1995). While these efforts helped make positive strides for groups of color, they were short lived. In the *Oklahoma City v. Dowell* (1991) case, where the court ruled that the supervision of local school districts was a temporary measure to correct discriminatory practices, schools would be relieved on any wrongdoing as soon as they exhibited their compliance with the court ordered mandate. Once schools met the requirements of their desegregation orders, they would drop components of their choice plan that prevented racial resegregation and reverted back to racially segregated schools. In addition, in the 2007 case of *Parents involved in community schools v. Seattle No. 1*, the U.S. Supreme Court invalidated two districts' policies that allowed race to be used as an admissions factor (Garnett & Schoenig, 2020). More importantly, school districts who had remedial supervisions for past discrimination and who were asked to employ voluntary integration measures that considered race, could no longer continue this practice due to the court ruling that this was unconstitutional and discriminatory against white families (Garnett & Schoenig, 2020). As a result, schools would employ choice systems that relied on colorblind factors (e.g., income level, parent's education, neighborhood) when assigning students to schools within the attendance boundaries (Garnett & Schoenig 2020).

As seen in the *Parents involved* case, Whites sought to retain control over the schools and the schooling of their children through the support of the courts and by pressuring school districts to implement changes that would benefit them and children. Rather than comply with federal court desegregation orders, Whites resisted using the freedom of choice plans, that were intended to provide White and Black parents interested in racial integration, the opportunity to send their children to the school of their choice. Instead, freedom of choice plans shifted the

responsibility of school integration on to Black families, because they would have to go through difficult process of trying to enroll their children in white majority schools while white families avoided integration by unenrolling their children from integrated schools or never attempting to enroll their children in schools with Black students (Donnor, 2013; Frankenberg, 2013; Garnett & Schoenig, 2020; Jabbar & Lenhoff, 2020; Lee, 2004; Orfield & Reardon, 1994; Orfield, 1997; Wong, 2018).

For example, when examining the parental decision-making process in school choice, factors in access to information, availability of schools, and racial/ethnic and socioeconomic composition of the school, have consistently emerged as critical factors for parents. Researchers note that when given the choices, parents will not always choose the best schools nor leave failing schools (Austin & Berends, 2018; Rossell, 1995). Instead, parents with a higher education and access to resources, select schools on the basis of socioeconomic status, choosing those largely made up of high-status students and avoiding those with low-income and minority students (Holme, 2002; Lareau & Goyette, 2014). When investigating the perception of school quality, Goyette (2008), found that white parents based their decision on the percentage of White and Black students in the school. If the school had a larger percentage of Black students, the quality of the school diminished, irrespective of its actual academic qualities. Billingham and Hunt (2016), also found similar results when interviewing parents on school choice. When provided with multiple school characteristics, White families primarily based their decision on the racial/ethnic makeup of students, resulting in choosing schools that were predominately White.

In their study, DeArmond, Jochim, and Lake (2014) conducted surveys with 4,000 parents in eight cities and found that: 33% of parents did not understand which schools their

children were eligible to transfer to, 26 % had no access to transportation for their children, and 25% had little to no information to school choice and how it worked. When compares to middle- and high-income Whites, low-income and parents of color, who often lacked resources and social networks, received limited information of school options, leading them to enroll their children in similar schools (Holme, 2002; Rhodes & DeLuca, 2014; Sattin-Bajaj, 2014). That is, in schools that had low standards in classroom and teacher characteristics, including teacher certification, instructional time, standardized curriculum subjects, reasonable sized classes, diverse curriculum; factors that are critical for student achievement growth, was often lacking in schools that students of color attended (Goldhaber, Lavery, & Theobald, 2015; Hanushek, 2016).

When parents were able to attain information and attempt to enroll their children in schools with better resources, Black and families of colors often were denied their school of choice due to the limited number of vouchers provided to Black and minority students who were low-income, English Language Learners, had disabilities, and had low test scores (Bell, 2004; Jabbar & Lenhoff, 2020; Robinson, 2000; Orfield 2013; Richards, 2014; Rossell, 1995; Siegel-Hawley, 2013). In addition, some schools would institute practices where they required students to pay uniform and other school fees, parents to volunteer for a specific number of hours, and provided students with limited or no transportation to school; making it extremely difficult for the most underserved students to gain access to schools outside their neighborhoods. For those who were successfully transferred into a middle- income and majority white schools, students and parents of color often underwent additional and complex procedures to transfer, had to travel long distances to attend school, as well as experienced harassment, abuse, resegregation, and poor educational outcomes (Bell, 2004; Jabbar & Lenhoff, 2020 Robinson, 2000; Orfield 2013; Richards, 2014; Rossell, 1995; Siegel-Hawley, 2013).

Choice was not only present in school enrollment but began to be implemented within schools as a detracking mechanism during the late 80's and early 90's (Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna 2002). During a critical time where schools were being pressured to integrate and address issues of inequity between and within schools, the implementation of choice as a detracking and desegregation mechanism played a significant role in ensuring that colorblind approaches would be used in determining and justifying access to a quality education (Noguera & Wing, 2006; Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna 2002). Similar to school choice, freedom of choice in course enrollment was meant to increase access to a quality education by removing the structural barriers for low-income and students of color. However, these colorblind practices fail to address the racial and class dynamics tied to tracking; allowing the racial and cultural myths to continue influencing the educational decisions and outcomes for students of color. More importantly, the responsibility and blame for addressing tracking structures falls on the shoulders of students and parents of color. As seen in the following studies, students' choices are largely shaped by their own identities and the power they hold in academic institutions (Noguera & Wing, 2006; Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna 2002).

In the three-year longitudinal case study in 10 racially mixed schools (six high schools and four middle schools), Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna (2002), found that choice failed as a detracking system. Through observations and interviews with students, school staff, and parents, the researchers found that when schools adopted choice without altering the prevailing tracking hierarchies, students of color continued to face barriers in enrolling in higher level courses. The racial and cultural dynamics behind intelligence and ability continued to affect the perceptions that teachers, school staff, students, and parents held of students of color. Although schools had reduced and eliminated some of the pre-requisites for enrolling in advanced courses, students of

color continued to face barriers: obtaining access to information about advanced courses and the hidden pre-requisites, and often got their requests delayed and/or denied by school staff when attempting to enroll in advanced courses. In addition, when students enrolled in advanced courses, they felt ostracized by their teachers, peers, and even the parents of White elite students and were forced to leave these spaces for those where they felt safe and accepted.

Similarly, Noguera and Wing (2006) examined the racial and class dynamics behind the achievement gap and segregation in a liberal high school that branded itself as being diverse and inclusive. Noguera and Wing (2006) employed a variety of research strategies that included an annual survey and study of the entire class of 2000; conducting focus groups with students, parents, school staff, and community program personnel; and analyzing practices in enrollment patterns, discipline patterns, review of their academic programs through observations and interviews. Within the six years of their study, they found the ways in which informal and formal “colorblind” practices were built into the school system and how they operated along racial and class lines. Amongst the various forms of institutional barriers that low-income and students of color faced, Noguera and Wing (2006) found that tracking continued through the use of choice practices that served to keep low-income and students of color from enrolling in advanced college prep courses and gaining information and resources for college. While the school claimed to provide students with choice in course selection, it was mainly for the general courses and not for the advanced courses, where strong scores on standardized tests determined students placement. In addition, as part of the unequal structure imbedded into the school system, teachers within the lower tracks were also seen as having low levels of teaching experience and education, increasing the achievement gap between white and students of color. Teachers, school staff, and the white wealthy parents were also found to have negative perceptions of students of

color and were often working together to ensure that white children achieved greater access and opportunities than students of color.

Ochoa (2013) also conducted a qualitative study examining the racial gap in academic achievement and opportunities for Latino and Asian students in South California High School. Though observations and interviews with students and their parents, and with school staff, Ochoa examined the processes that foster the achievement and opportunity gaps through various levels of analysis including: macro-historical events and theoretical movements that have contributed to the unequal labeling and outcomes for low-income and students of color; meso- school policy and practices that shape the everyday experiences of students along racial and class lines; and micro- include the everyday attitudes and actions of students. From her interviews and observations, she found that teachers, staff, and students often referred to underlying assumptions of intelligence being part of the genetic makeup for specific racial groups and using these assumptions to justify why certain groups of students should be placed in different tracks (International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), Honors, Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID), and College Preparatory (CP) classes). More importantly, Ochoa documents how students who describe racism within their school show acts of resistance by joining groups such as the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana/o de Aztlan (MEChA), or other students in some classrooms to disrupt assumptions and change the school environment. Ochoa, like other critical researchers, shared her data with the school to implement change. However, she found that few teachers and staff were interested in implementing changed and thus took it upon herself to create a program to address the achievement gap at the school; a program she felt could not have a great impact due to school faculty unwilling to understand and address their own biases.

As these studies have found, successful detracking is politically difficult and aspects of tracking often persist despite strong efforts by activists (Noguera & Wing, 2006; Oakes et al., 1997; Ochoa, 2013; Wells & Serna, 1996). This is partly because detracking requires educators, parents, and students to challenge long held beliefs of ability, intelligence, merit, and its relationship to race and class (Oakes et al., 1997). The racial and cultural connection to tracking and the benefits associated to this practice (e.g. differentiated treatment from teachers and school administrators, access to higher quality and challenging material from the best teachers, access to higher order skills, and resources deemed as valuable by selective universities and the dominant society, as well as being labeled as intelligent) make it more difficult to eliminate, especially for those who greatly benefit from its use. As seen in all the previously mentioned studies, white elite parents of high-track students, clearly understood how they significantly benefitted when educators maintained the conventional views of intelligence and as a result these parents use their social, economic, political positions in society and within the school to denounce detracking reform efforts. For these parents, the full implementation of detracking efforts would challenge their access to these courses but would also disrupt dominant views that portray them as the most intelligent, hardworking, and thus the most deserving group in society (Wells & Serna, 1996). Therefore, the use of choice as a detracking effort, allows for tracking to continue within schools because it does little to address the underlying racial and cultural perceptions tied to tracking. It provides a false image of integration and equity while allowing inequality to remain unchallenged.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory: Why Race Matters in Educational Choices in Course Enrollment

Critical Race Theory (CRT) offers an analytic framework to better examine and understand the role of race within detracked schools using choice practices for course assignment. After school districts across the country were forced to integrate, White community and educational leaders utilized legally backed practices that would protect their rights to a high-quality education while simultaneously denying equal access to students of color. Though the use of colorblind practices like choice, marginalized groups are made to believe that their children are afforded the same opportunities to college preparatory and academically challenging courses as white students. However, choice practices hide the complex ways in which students of color continue to be segregated within their school and denied access to these courses.

Critical Race Theory. Discontent with the slow progress of the civil rights movement, a group of Critical Legal Studies scholars, lawyers, and activists (Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado) worked to uncover the underpinnings of American legal theory through a racial framework (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; DeCuir and Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefaniec, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lynn, 1999; Parker & Lynn, 2002). They noted that while Blacks and other groups of color gained equality before the law, they continued to experience racism in all parts of society, leading to a lower standard of living when compared to Whites. Despite these realities, other CLS scholars opposed the use of race as a tool for examining inequities and further marginalized scholars of color within a movement largely made up of mostly white Marxist and postmodernist legal scholars. The failure of CLS to analyze the effects of race and racism in law and society, led CLS scholars of color to develop a new legal framework known as Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Crenshaw, 1998; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller,

& Thomas, 1995; Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Harris, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lynn, 1999; Parker & Lynn, 2002).

To overcome the limitations and gaps in legal literature, CRT researchers use race as their central unit of analysis to examine discourse surrounding race and racism and the ways in which they have been conveyed in law and throughout society. Through these efforts, they work to disrupt mainstream legal discourse preserving the idea that we live in a meritocratic and colorblind society (DeCuir and Dixson, 2004; Crenshaw et al., 1996). Furthermore, CRT scholars seek to examine how a system of white supremacy and the subordination of people of color have been created and upheld through the use of law and ideals. Carried over from CLS, Critical Race Theorists critique liberalism by rejecting the belief that liberal legal discourse and its application in society is neutral and objective (Crenshaw et al., 1996). With its explicit embrace of race consciousness, Critical Race Theory also aims to “recover and revitalize the radical tradition of race-consciousness among African-Americans and other peoples of color” (Crenshaw et al., 1996, p. xiv). With these objectives and a commitment to social change, CRT scholars incorporate the use of tenets (racism is endemic, whiteness as property, colorblindness, interest convergence, counter-storytelling, and intersectionality) to “demonstrate that the experience of people of color are legitimate, appropriate, and effective bases for analyzing the legal system and racial subordination” (Tate, 1997, p.196).

CRT Tenets. One of the main components of CRT includes the critique of liberalism and its ideologies of meritocracy, neutrality of the law, colorblindness, and equality for all (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; DeCuir and Dixson, 2004; Gotanda, 1991; Tate, 1997). The myth of meritocracy stems from the belief that systemic racism ended after the passage of the Civil Rights Act and thus colorblind policies and practices are the only way to achieve equitable

results for all groups. According to this line of reasoning, race conscious processes such as affirmative action policies and institutional practices, work against the main goals of the Civil Rights Act and thus equality because “deserving Whites” would be denied equal opportunities (Crenshaw, 2007). Instead, liberals, argue that because racism has been eradicated, and only exists at the individual level, minority groups can overcome past injustices through individual effort, responsibility, and merit (Bell, 2000; Crenshaw, 2011; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Donnor, 2013). In other words, society’s playing field has been leveled, making the need for race conscious processes unnecessary and irrelevant in an already meritocratic society.

However, a more critical examination of colorblindness as a method for equity, reveals that this framework does nothing more than advance a restricted notion of equity that obscures “entrenched ideological practices, ontological meanings, and structural arrangements that advance the self-interests and racial privileges of Whites” (Donnor, 2013, p. 196). For example, when examining the recipients of affirmative action hiring policies, Whites have been some the major beneficiaries (Crenshaw, 2007; Guy-Sheftall, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Although, greatly attacked by Whites, the policy of affirmative action has greatly benefitted white women in gaining greater access to a college education and in obtaining higher paid positions within the job market (Crenshaw, 2007; Guy-Sheftall, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Furthermore, the notion of colorblindness, ignores a 400-year history of white domination, where access to rights, resources, and opportunities were given and withheld based entirely on race (Omni & Winant, 2002; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Ignoring race and racism within our society, ignores the true cause of inequity and negates the purpose to bring about change by making it difficult to “interrogate both the ways that white privilege is deployed” and normalized (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 29). In education, the lack of race conscious efforts to hire and support teachers of color,

include the history of oppression and resistance of people of color within the curriculum, address the issues of re-segregation between and within schools, as well as change the school discipline policies supports the notion of colorblindness (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson Billings & Tate, 2006; Romero, 2013) Moreover, the use of colorblind methods in the previously mentioned issues, conceals the ways in which white school leaders both directly and indirectly influence the academic decisions and outcomes of students of color while simultaneously protecting access to for middle- and upper-income white students. Therefore, in order to make a meaningful change, race conscious policies and practices need to be developed. More importantly CRT scholars work towards unmasking and exposing racism behind colorblind processes in education to make real progress towards equity.

An additional CRT tenet is interest convergence. Originated by Derrick Bell, interest convergence clarifies how racial progress for African Americans and other groups of color can only be realized when it converges with the interests of Whites (Bell, 1992, 2000, 2005; Brown & Jackson, 2013; Tate, 1997). In addition, Bell (1992,1995, 2000, 2005) contends that many of the civil rights gains were superficial because they were basic rights and opportunities that Whites already enjoyed and should have been provided to all U.S. citizens. If and when racial gains for groups of color are granted, it is only when they secure, advance, or at least not threaten the status and interests of middle- and upper-class Whites (Bell, 1995; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Brown & Jackson, 2013). For example, when examining the reasoning behind *Brown v. Board of Education* and the passage of the civil rights act, Bell highlights that these decisions were not the result of altruism amongst Whites but rather decisions that were fostered by the desire to advance the economic and political agendas of the U.S. nationally and abroad. The U.S. used *Brown* and the civil rights to gain support from emerging independent nations in its struggle against

communism, to lessen the threat of social and political unrest amongst Blacks and other marginalized groups across the country, and to facilitate the economic development of the South, which was seen as a barrier to the progression of the country and its image 'all men are created equal' (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Milner IV, Pearman III, & McGee, 2013). While *Brown v. Board of Education* led to the end of de jure school segregation, it did so only to the extent that new forms of resegregation would be difficult to dismantle by putting the responsibility on plaintiffs to prove that new policies and practices occurred as a result of intentional racism or discrimination. In addition, practices such as freedom of school choice and similar desegregation plans; meant to address issues of access and equity for students of color, have largely benefitted Whites by allowing them to avoid integration and instead giving them the freedom to flee to private schools or to suburban neighborhood schools that are majority white-middle-and-upper class (Bell,1995; Donnor, 2013).

Developed by Harris (1993), the concept of whiteness as property posits that whiteness, is a treasured property that guarantees inalienable rights and opportunities (i.e. immunities, human rights, liberties, powers, and freedoms of conscience, expression, and bodily harm) to those who are categorized as white (Harris, 1995). Through colonization and full control of the courts and other institutions, Whites established a society that validates their whiteness by unequally allocating economic, political, and social rights, resources, and opportunities by race. Over time and by virtue of their existence, Whites have come to expect and depend on an exclusive set of economic, political, social, and structural advantages associated to their whiteness and have protected these benefits through inheritance, use of force, coercion, consent, and the exclusion of non-Whites (Harris, 1995; Lopez, 1996, Mills, 1997; Winant, 2001). As a consequence, the racial inequities perpetuated by whiteness, establish a set of explicit and

implicit rules regarding access and utilization that ultimately work to advance white supremacy (Harris, 1995; Mills, 1997). Furthermore, because whiteness is continuously protected through social institutions and structural influences, the political, economic, and social benefits attached to whiteness, and its history of assignment to Whites by Whites, becomes normalized and invisible to current and future generations, absolving them of responsibility for creating and maintaining an unjust society (Donnor, 2013). More specifically, by overseeing educational institutions, Whites protect and normalize their status in society by ensuring that access to quality curriculum, quality teachers, and well-funded schools remains a property of whiteness (Donnor, 2013; Greene, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson Billings & Tate, 2006; Romero; 2013).

A fourth component of CRT is the concept of permanence of racism in US society. Race and racism are permanent components of American society because this country's historical foundation and current progress is dependent of the economic, social, and political exploitation and oppression of people of color (Bell, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997). Whether racism is practiced consciously or unconsciously, it has become an inherent component of American life, privileging Whites over people of color in all aspects of society, including education (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado, 1995; Ladson Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In his 1987 book, *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice* and in, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (1992), Bell introduced the concept of racial realism and how knowing and accepting racism as permanent and indestructible components of American society, we are provided with a certain freedom that helps us understand that racism will require more than the passage of a few policies but a long-term commitment to challenging white supremacy and racism in all parts of society. By exposing

the visible and invisible ways in which white supremacy and racism are manifested in society, people of color can fight to weaken their basis and its effects on oppressed groups. In education, CRT can help us examine more than just the social impacts of racism but how it continues to be reinforced through structural and institutional colorblind processes. When schools fail to consider the historical existence and practice of racism within schools and society, well intended institutional processes can further promote and protect racism, especially when working to improve diversity efforts in higher level high school courses (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Another essential principle of CRT includes Counter-storytelling. Counter-narratives from people of color work to weaken the claims of racial neutrality in legal scholarship, by allowing people of color to name their own reality through narratives that reveal the visible invisible and ways racism affects the daily life of people of color (Delgado, 1989, 1990, 1995). As seen in Derrick Bell's book, *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice* (1987), Patricia Williams's *Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (1987), and Richard Delgado's *Rodrigo Chronicles: Conversations about Race in America* (1995), the use of stories, parables, chronicles, poetry or narratives by people of color help to invalidate the accepted myths and racial stereotypes held by Whites while re-constructing and confirming their everyday experiences as truths (DeCuir and Dixson, 2004, p. 27; Tate, 1997). Furthermore, counter-storytelling serves as a community-building function that provides members of outgroups with psychic self-preservation. Having people of color learn and reflect on their experiences of oppression as a group or community can help prevent self-condemnation and create a common culture of shared understandings that recognize both the history of oppression and resistance from people of color (Delgado, 1989, 1990, 1995). Therefore, including the voices of students, teachers, and educational staff of color in research, helps us understand the various

ways that racism is embedded in race neutral policies and practices in schools as well as illustrate the short- and long-term effects they have on the academic opportunities and outcomes for students of color.

Another theory associated with CRT is intersectionality. The failure of the legal system to recognize and address the convergence of race, class, gender, and sexuality on their everyday lives of women of color led legal scholar, Kimberly Crenshaw, to name and expand on the term (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Mayeri, 2015). Crenshaw theorized how conventional civil rights language was largely based on the experience of black men, while conventional feminism was focused on the experiences of white women (Crenshaw, 1989,1991, 2007, 2011). The lack of discourse necessary to describe the multiple forms of inequity for being black, a woman, and a worker, forced black women to pursue their discrimination through a single lens: racial, gender, or as an employee. In response to these challenges, Crenshaw developed intersectionality as an analytical tool to account for the complexity of intra-group power relations and its influence on inequity and oppression that women and other marginalized groups face in society. The critical race feminist response to the court's dismissal of intersectional claims generated a revolutionizing legal and scholarly movement that resonated far beyond the realm of employment discrimination and violence against women of color (Mayeri, 2015; Spade, 2013). In the education system, it has become critical to approach issues of diversity and equity from an intersectional lens (Weis & Fine, 1993). As scholars have noted, race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, religion are all critically important in shaping the everyday educational experiences of students of color. More importantly, when different markers of identity interact with a system of power and subordination, we can better understand the difference in access to

high quality curricula, teachers, and resources, and academic and social outcomes for different students of color (Andersen & Collins, 2012; Collins 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Crenshaw 1993). Through an intersectional approach, we can interrogate education policies and practices that silence students' experiences and fail to support marginalized students' academic and social outcomes. Additionally, by using intersectionality we can examine and address educational disparities resulting from unchallenged institutional, structural, political, and representational frameworks that fail to embrace an intersectional approach (Davis, Brunn-Bevel, Olive, 2015).

CRT's Extension to Education. Drawing from the work of Du Bois, CRT was able to become transdisciplinary and expanded to areas outside of law such as education. CRT scholars in education are concerned with reforming a racially discriminatory education system to better meet the needs of all children and youth who require a quality yet meaningful and empowering education that will allow them to be politically, socially, and economically involved. By drawing on other schools of progressive theories and research, Critical Race Theory in education has expanded to include various issues such as racism in Asian American education, American Indian Education, English literary, Chicana/o/x education, teacher preparation, and other issues affecting minoritized groups (Solórzano, 2013). Research in these areas have been significant in challenging educational practices and policies that interfere with the rights and opportunities of students of color. Educators who have utilized CRT challenge the colorblind curriculum, pedagogy, and school culture by bringing awareness to how race shapes privilege, violence, and exclusion for students of color.

CRT was first applied to education discourse in 1995 when Ladson-Billings and Tate argued that the intersection of race and property rights shaped educational inequity. The idea that race should be used as the methodical tool for examining race and racism in the education system

is a major contribution of CRT (Crenshaw, 2011; Delgado, 1995; Delgado & Stefanic, 2001). Although race is socially constructed, it must be examined due to the fact that it continues to be used for the purpose of labeling people of color as inferior and ‘othering’ them in terms of treatment, rights, and opportunities. The expansion of CRT into education informs scholars of the ways in which the permanence of racism in the U.S. is upheld within institutions that serve to educate and create equal opportunities for all students. Despite the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that eradicated *de jure* racial segregation, *de facto* segregation continues to affect schools, creating unequal outcomes for students of color (Orfield, 2009). Beyond the issue of segregation in public schools, scholars have sought to reveal the ways in which racism is exhibited in “race neutral” policy, pedagogy, and curriculum (Chapman, 2013; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Niguera & Wing, 2006; Oakes, 2005; Ochoa, 2013; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013; Rubin, 2003, 2006; Rubin & Noguera, 2004; Rubin & Silva, 2003; Wells & Serna, 1996). Through the use of CRT, scholars in education seek to show the direct relationship between race and inequity for students of color. In addition, CRT scholars in education have contested false beliefs of people of color that blame cultural practices and poverty as main reasons for educational discrepancies (Solorzano, 1997; Rubin, 2003, 2006; Yosso, 2005). According to Tate (1997), research in law and education has been largely based on political, scientific, and religious theories that rely on racial stereotypes that uphold and legitimize negative views and treatments of groups of color. Moreover, early research in intellectual assessments and school achievement have depicted students of color as “biologically and genetically inferior when compared to Whites” (Tate, 1997, p. 199). Thus, CRT researchers in education are compelled to expose and challenge the ways in which racist policies and practices within the education system continue to oppress people of color through unequal means to a quality education that would allow the

socioeconomic and political advancement of people from these groups. Education scholars and activists use CRT's tenets to present institutional, theoretical, and policy interventions in education (Cabardo, 2011).

Summary of Chapter

This chapter examined the role of tracking and its effects on students of color from a critical race perspective (CRT). By critically examining the historical implementation of tracking in U.S. schools, as well as its direct relationship to race and class, we can further understand how tracking serves to reproduce inequity within society through the exclusion and denial of a quality education for students of color. However, after the condemnation by educational researchers, choice emerged as the main form of detracking effort. As seen with freedom of school choice, the implementation of choice as a detracking method does little to directly eliminate the structural and social barriers that are tied to tracking and instead masks the continued inequities that persist in schools.

CRT provides an important lens for understanding how tracking through choice practices plays out in schools and how it affect the academic outcomes of students of color at Willow Glen High School. More importantly, CRT allows for a critical examination of how choice masks the permanence of racism within schools as well as how schools place more value on the interests of Whites even in liberal and racially mixed schools.

Chapter 3: Methods

General Purpose and Research Questions

This research examines the processes and outcomes of freedom of choice practices on course enrollment decisions for students of color. More specifically, using CRT as my theoretical framework, I am interested in examining the institutional and social factors influencing students' choice in course enrollment and whether these factors aid detracking mechanisms or uphold academic tracking practices at Willow Glen High School. I examined the following research questions through a CRT perspective that engages five prominent tenets (counter-storytelling, the permanence of racism, whiteness as property, interest convergence, and the critique of liberalism):

- 1) What institutional factors (e.g. guidance counselors, teachers, tests, peers, etc.) are influencing students' academic decisions and outcomes?
- 2) How does the intersection of race and class influence students' academic choices, opportunities, and perceptions of themselves and their peers?

Research Design

To better understand the academic experiences of students of color as it relates to choice practices at Willow Glen High School, this case study employs an ethnographic approach. This project was based on a qualitative research design because it represents “a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals ascribe to a social human problem” (Creswell, 2009, p. 4). Moreover, this research approach allows for the examination of the invisible and visible ways that tracking, through choice practices, relates to issues of race and class, as well as how these relationships shape the educational decisions and outcomes of students of color. While I was not allowed to directly observe students within the school, through the use of interviews

with students and parents, and analyzing school documents, I was able to explore the many ways in which students' academic choices are influenced by institutional and social factors within the school.

Given the exploratory nature of this project, this design helps with understanding the issues from students' and parents perspectives through participants questions that focus on what they are experiencing, how they make sense of their everyday experiences, and how they structure the social world in which they are a part of (Psathas, 1973). Through individual semi-structured interviews with students and parents, I was able to delve deeper into their individual experiences and how they interpret them. The goal was to understand how institutional and social factors shaped students' decisions and the meanings they attach to their experiences in being enrolled in a college or general track. In addition, I am interested in how their experiences shaped their perceptions of themselves and their peers.

Meaning is a fundamental concern to the qualitative approach because it allows the researcher to examine how different people make sense of their daily experiences, feelings, and perceptions (Erikson, 1986). Researchers gain significant insight, create, and develop theory by probing into how participants' interpret and make meaning of their experiences (Geertz, 1973). At the same time, for the purposes of this project, the qualitative design is useful for identifying shared and varied patterns of perception and experiences in regard to how tracking plays out along racial and class lines.

Critical Theory and Education Research

Critical Race Theory has influenced qualitative methods through its focus on uncovering and challenging notions of normality in race and racism in all parts of society. In the context of education, CRT theorists bring attention to the ways in which racism is embedded and upheld

through policies and practices that influence the educational experiences of students of color (Bell, 1992, 2005; Bernal, 2002; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Decuir and Dixson, 2004; Gotanda, 1991; Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Tate, 1997). More specifically, in uncovering and challenging race neutral policies in education, CRT researchers have shed light on disparities in academic achievement, graduation, push out, expulsion rates, academic support and preparation through six tenets (racism is endemic, whiteness as property, colorblindness, interest convergence, counter-storytelling, intersectionality) (Bell, 1992, 2005; Bernal, 2002; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Decuir and Dixson, 2004; Gotanda, 1991; Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Tate, 1997). More importantly, CRT's methodology includes the use of storytelling (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Bernal, 2002). Storytelling, from a CRT perspective, is a critical component that serves to empower historically marginalized groups by allowing their narratives of everyday experiences with racism and discrimination be heard and affect change. Moreover, the voices of people of color are not just heard but serve to counter the dominant ideologies of race that serve to silence and justify their oppression as people of color.

In analyzing students' experiences, I will utilize CRT qualitative methodology of storytelling to determine whether instances of racism pervade the school setting and influence students' academic decisions and outcomes. More specifically, CRT allows me to look deeper into the interaction between race, class, and institutional dynamics as it relates to equity and access. By using students' own narrative as counter storytelling as well applying the other CRT tenets (racism is endemic, whiteness as property, colorblindness, interest convergence), we can further evaluate the use of colorblind practices as "solutions" to racial inequity in schools. In

addition, through a Critical Race framework, we can examine the specific ways in which institutional factors shape students' decisions to enroll and not enroll in advanced courses and the benefits and costs to their academic decisions. In examining these questions, race and racism are placed at the forefront to examine whether students of color at WGH actually benefit from this colorblind practice.

Site

All semi-structured interviews with eight students and two parents were conducted and audio recorded in their homes. Their home was chosen as a place of interview because this would be a more comfortable location where the students and parents could openly express their thoughts about their academic experiences. In addition, the convenience of location for both the students and parents, made their home a suitable place to conduct the interviews. The interviews with students were held during the evenings with their parents in the home. Interviews with parents, were held during the weekday, without their children present during the interviews. To ensure the safety for participants who were minors, the presence of a parents or a guardian was required for interviews.

While my intention was to also conduct classroom observations, teachers at Willow Glen High School were hesitant to allow me into their classrooms. I had received permission from the principal to conduct classroom observations, but he would leave the final decision up to teachers. I had e-mailed the AP teachers, asking to observe their courses multiple times and only a few teachers e-mailed me back letting me know they did not feel comfortable letting me come into their classes.

Willow Glen Community

Willow Glen High School is located in an urban community in the Midwest, with a population of approximately 41,989 and a median household income of 33,081. During 2019, the poverty rate was at 29.8% and about 96.2% held a high school degree or higher and 60% held a bachelor's degree or higher. Willow Glen's community is made up of: 59.3% White, 16.8% Black, 0.3% American Indian and Alaska Native, 19.6 Asian, 5.3% Hispanics, and 3.3% two or more races. The median age in is 24. Thirty percent of the population are over 15 years of age and married, 75% speak English and 4% speak Spanish. Fifty-six percent of residents were born in the Midwest and 19% were foreign born. In 2019, the median property value in Willow Glen was \$155,000, and the homeownership rate was 35.6%. In the 2020 presidential election, over half of Willow Glen residents voted for President Biden, showing a strong democratic lean. In addition, the top occupations/industries within the Willow Glen area include healthcare, education and higher education, factories, agriculture, business, management, administration food servicing, and transportation.

School

Willow Glen High School (WGH) was originally built during the early 1900's in a predominately White and middle-class area. During the 1960's Black families in Willow Glen worked tirelessly to integrate their schools within the district and essentially became one of the first to desegregate.

During the 2018-2019 school year, WGH served about 1,185 students from 9-12 grade and from a diverse racial and socioeconomic background (refer to Table 3.1 and 3.2 for racial and class breakdown). In addition, 63% of students are considered low-income, 9% are English learners, 16% have a disability, and 2% are homeless.

Table 3.1
Student Racial/Ethnic Background at Willow Glen High School (2017-2019)

Race/Ethnicity	%
White	36
Black	38
Hispanic	13
Asian	4
American Indian	1
Two or More Races	7
Pacific Islander	1

Table 3.2
Student Income Demographics at Willow Glen High School (2017-2019)

Student Income Demographics	%
Low-Income	63%
Middle-income	37%

Unlike surrounding school districts who have received more attention for their legal battles with racial disparities, WGH has been overlooked by researchers. While WGH does not have a long history of legal mandates, it has and continues to face similar issues with racial equity. Willow Glen High School prides itself as a multi-cultural community committed to educational excellence of its students, however as students' experiences will show, choice practices only mask the larger institutional and social barriers that students continue to face within an integrated liberal school.

Willow Glen High School was chosen as a site due to its convenient location in a liberal town where a large proportion of well-educated professionals live. The significance of WGH's location in a liberal community was important because this allows for a critical examination of the academic decisions made by school administrators, who work closely with university leaders when making decisions about programs and curriculum. More specifically, it helps us interrogate the reasoning behind the use of choice practices in a diverse school as well as who is allowed to

benefit from these practices. In addition, it also helps us understand how the school's location in a liberal town shows that even in these locations, issues of race and racism continue to influence the opportunities of people of color through colorblind practices such as choice.

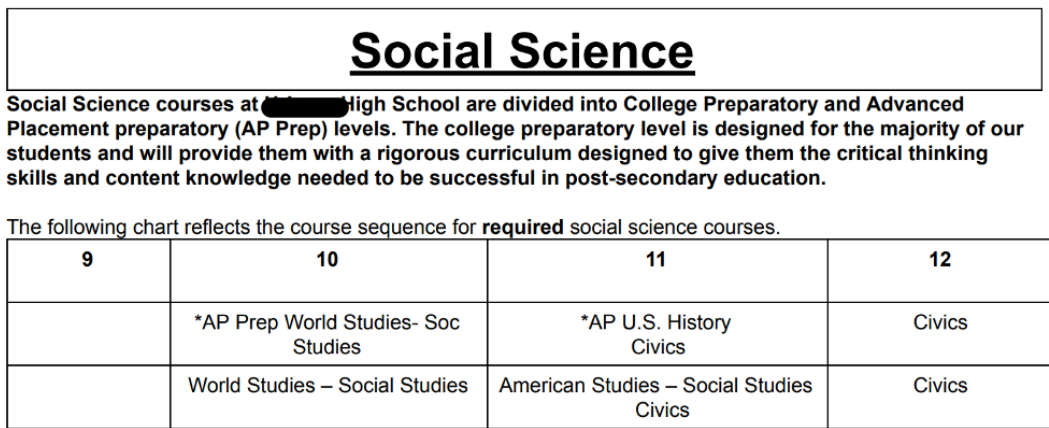
Policy for Enrolling in AP/AP Prep

Courses at WGH are divided into two academic tracks that includes the college preparatory track (general track that does not include AP or AP prep courses) and the Advanced Placement track (AP preparatory and AP courses). From my conversations with students and parents, their understanding of the enrollment in Advanced Preparatory courses at WGH is that any student with strong grades in the general courses can request to be placed in the AP prep courses. For students wanting to enroll in AP courses, it is strongly recommended that they enroll and successfully pass the AP prep courses. While the student handbook suggests that students and parents follow the placement recommendations of their advisors, which are based on a number of measures and criteria such as grades, performance on standardized tests, teacher recommendation, placement in these courses is ultimately the decision of the parent/guardian. Students are not limited in the number of AP prep or AP courses they can take within a school year and can take courses in both tracks. WGH offers sixteen Advanced Placement (AP) courses: English Literature and Composition, Studio Art 2D, Studio Art Drawing, Chemistry, Physics B, Physics C, Biology, Environmental Science, Macroeconomics, United States History, Psychology, Calculus AB, Calculus BC, Language exams in French, German, and Spanish.

As seen in the figures below, students are provided with two course sequences for each track. While some schools usually do not provide advanced placement courses until junior and senior year, at WGH, students can begin enrolling in Advanced Placement courses through the AP preparatory courses as early as in the ninth grade. In addition to the Advanced Placement

courses, WGH does provide students with access to Dual Enrollment courses. However, these courses are mainly focused on career development/certificates in fields such as welding, criminal justice, emergency medical services, computer networking, health professions (certified nursing assistant), manufacturing. This study primarily focused on courses in the college prep (general track/course) and the Advanced Placement track.

Figure 3.1
Social Science Track Placement Preparatory Level and Trajectory



Source: Picture from the student handbook for Willow Glen High School

Figure 3.2
Science Track Placement Preparatory Level and Trajectory

Science			
<p>Science courses at ██████ High School are divided into College Preparatory and Advanced Placement preparatory (APPrep) levels. The college preparatory level is designed for the majority of our students and will provide them with a rigorous curriculum designed to give them the critical thinking skills and content knowledge needed to be successful in post-secondary education.</p> <p>The following chart reflects the general sequence of both required and elective science courses.</p>			
9	10	11	12
*AP Prep Biology	*AP Prep Chemistry/Physics	*AP Physics 1 *AP Chemistry *AP Biology *AP Environmental Science *Anatomy & Physiology Physics Earth & Space Science Environmental Science Zoology Animal & Plant Science Veterinary Science	*AP Physics 1 *AP Biology *AP Chemistry *AP Physics C *AP Environmental Science *Anatomy & Physiology Physics Earth & Space Science Environmental Science Zoology Animal & Plant Science Veterinary Science
Biology	*AP Prep Chemistry/Physics Chemistry/Physics	*Anatomy & Physiology Chemistry *AP Environmental Science Earth & Space Science Physics Environmental Science Zoology	*AP Physics 1 *Anatomy & Physiology *AP Biology *AP Chemistry *AP Environmental Science Physics Chemistry Earth & Space Science Environmental Science Zoology

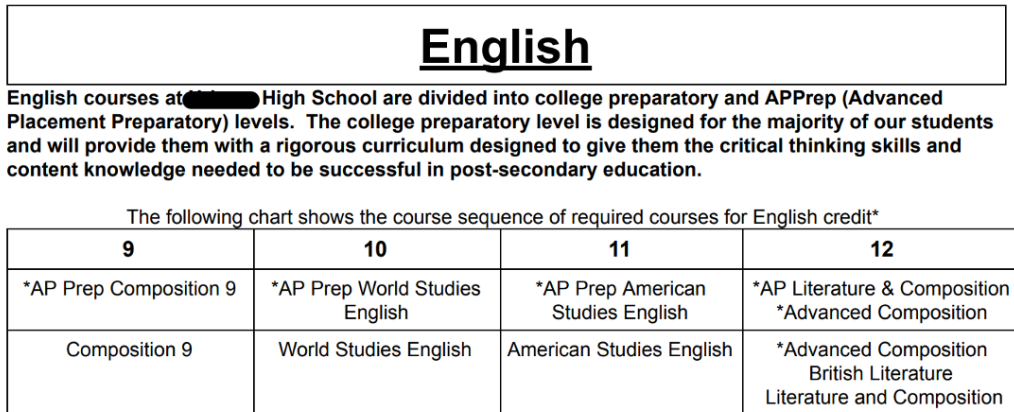
Source: Picture from the student handbook for Willow Glen High School

Figure 3.3
Math Track Placement Preparatory Level and Trajectory

MATHEMATICS				
<p>Math courses at ██████ High School are divided into college preparatory and Advanced Placement Preparatory (APPrep) levels. The college preparatory level is designed for the majority of our students and will provide them with a rigorous curriculum designed to give them the critical thinking skills and content knowledge needed to be successful in postsecondary education</p> <p>The following chart reflects the general course sequence.</p>				
8 th	9 th	10 th	11 th	12 th
8 th Grade Math	Algebra 1	Geometry	Algebra 2	Algebra 3 PreCalc/Trig *AP Statistics
8 th Grade Algebra 1	Geometry	Algebra 2	Algebra 3 PreCalc/Trig *AP Statistics	PreCalc/Trig *AP Prep PreCalc/Trig *AP Calculus AB *AP Statistics
	*AP Prep Geometry	*AP Prep Algebra 2	*AP Prep PreCalc/Trig.	* AP Calculus AB *AP Calculus BC *AP Statistics

Source: Picture from the student handbook for Willow Glen High School

Figure 3.4
English Track Placement Preparatory Level and Trajectory



Source: Picture from the student handbook for Willow Glen High School

Participants

For this study, the subject population consisted of eight participants, six students who attended and/or who had graduated from Willow Glen High School and were enrolled in either or both college preparatory courses (AP prep classes) and regular courses (non-college preparatory courses) and two parents of students who had previously attended WGH. At the time of the interviews, student participants ages spanned from 14 years to 18 years.

While the initial goal was to recruit a more diverse sample of students and parents of color that included participants from lower income and from working class backgrounds, limited access to parents and students from these backgrounds led to my participants being majority middle class and from middle-income backgrounds. Students like Tatiana and Rosa were the only two students who were low-income but from middle class families. For the case of this study, middle class is examined from a sociological and anthropologist perspective, where occupational status and/or educational achievements and qualifications is emphasized (Brookings, 2018). The implication here is that people with a college degree are considered middle class (Brookings, 2018).

Table 3.3
Race/Ethnicity and Income of Student Participants

Race/Ethnicity	# of Participants	Income and Class
Black	3	
Nicki		Middle-Income and Middle Class
Taylor		Middle-Income and Middle Class
Tatiana		Low-Income and Middle Class
West Asian/Middle Eastern	1	
Kiki		Middle-Income and Middle Class
Latina	1	
Rosa		Low-Income and Middle Class
Multi-Racial	1	
Liliana		Middle-Income and Middle Class

Table 3.4
Race/Ethnicity, Income and Class of Parent Participants

Race/Ethnicity	# of Participants	Income and Social Class
Multi-Racial	1	
Carmen		Middle-Income and Middle Class
Latino	1	
Manuel		Middle-Income and Middle Class

Table 3.5
Participant Interviews Conducted from 2017-2019

Participants	2017	2018	2019
Students Interviewed	Rosa	Nicki, Angela, Tatiana	Liliana, Kiki
Parents interviewed	n/a	n/a	Carmen, Manuel

Selection Criteria

The criteria for selecting participants were based on the following: Participants must be currently enrolled or have graduated from Willow Glen High School and were in either or both college preparatory and general courses (general, AP prep, AP courses). Participants must be students of color in any grade from ninth to twelve grades. Only information from students of color will be collected and analyzed due to the focus of this study and the focus of using their voices as counter stories to the dominant paradigms and to bring awareness to the experiences of students of color. Participants must have been willing to meet for one to two individual interviews (30 minutes-1 hour long) as well as for follow-up interviews. Participants who are minors must also obtain parent consent and give consent themselves to participating in the study.

Recruitment of participants

Convenient and snowball sampling was used by first reaching out to parents I had connections with at a non-profit in the Willow Glen area and who were parents of Willow Glen High School students. Through e-mail, I asked if they and/or their children would like to participate in the study and included an outline of the research objectives and timeline of completion. Voluntary participation was ensured by informing the parent/legal guardian and their children's/s' right to refuse participation and of their right to stop taking part at any time, even

after their parents have given consent for them to participate. After reaching out to parents/legal guardians and interviewing their children, I would ask participants if they could put me in contact with other potential parents and students who would possibly be interested in participating in my study. After contacting potential participants, sometimes parents or students would not follow up and I had to keep contacting them to ask if they were still interested in participating in the study and asking if they knew of other parents and students who would be interested in the study. I mainly relied on parents and students close connections within the Willow Glen community. While I was initially interested in recruiting student and parents of color from different class backgrounds, due to the limited connections and access to these groups, the students and parents that were often available and willing to meet with me often resembled the demographic backgrounds of their close networks which were middle-income and middle class. I was able to connect to a few potential parents and students from low-income and lower-class backgrounds, but issues with scheduling mainly affected their ability to meet with me.

Participant Profiles

Nicki is a seventeen-year-old high school senior, who identifies as a Black middle-income and middle-class female. As evidenced by her telling me about her mother's level of education, income, and position as an administrator at a non-profit, her family was considered middle-income and middle class. When Nicki heard from a parent that I was recruiting students from Willow Glen High School for my study, she not only made sure that I interviewed her, but she recruited her friend, Tatiana, and younger sister, Angela, for my study. She was really eager to share her personal experiences at the school and in the community.

While attending Willow Glen, Nicki was enrolled in both AP and general courses with the goal of going to college and becoming a veterinary. She was enrolled in the veterinary internship program that the school offered and was involved in multiple college preparatory programs and after-school programs that aided in college readiness. Nicki also worked part-time in an after-school program during the week and during the summer. The community-based program offered a range of resources to students (k-12) from the Willow Glen community including homework help, tutoring, access to meals and snacks, computer access, and college readiness support. Most of the employees at her job were high school students of color from WGH and college students who volunteered.

Nicki, who is the middle child of her siblings, discussed how her family was originally living below the poverty level. Since their time living in poverty, her mother had always been the family's breadwinner and the head of their household. Her family was originally from a city about three hours away from Willow Glen, where they witnessed severe poverty. However, lack of jobs and the growing poverty, convinced her mother and father to leave their town and move to Willow Glen. Nicki described how her father struggled to find job opportunities in Willow Glen while her mother found low-wage jobs. This, as well as other issues, led to her parents' divorce, leaving Nicki's mother as a single parent. Nicki described how they struggled to survive by not being able to afford to buy food and other essential necessities, as well as her mother having to pay off the debt left by her father who struggled with addiction. These issues motivated Nicki's mother to attend college and earn a bachelors and master's degree and obtained a higher paying career as an administrator in a non-profit. Having had these experiences and watching her mother overcome such great obstacles influenced Nicki to stay motivated in school and to want to attend college after high school.

Angela is sixteen-year-old high school junior, who identifies as a Black, middle-income, middle class female. She is Nicki's younger sister. She is the youngest child out of her three siblings. Similar to Nicki's response, Angela reported that her family is middle-income and middle class as evidenced by her telling me about her mother's educational level, occupation as an administrator, and income. Throughout her time at Willow Glen, Angela, had been mainly enrolled in general courses, except for one semester, where she enrolled in an AP prep course but then later changed to a regular course. When discussing her future goals, Angela described wanting to become a reconstructive surgeon and/or possibly major in film and animation. She had been inspired by a well know surgeon who has a YouTube channel and walks his viewers through his surgeries. What inspired her to also consider film and animation was doing a school project in her civics class where she had the opportunity to edit a video that she and her peer created. She has her own YouTube channel and does all the editing for her videos. Like her sister Nicki, Angela, was also involved in the same academic programs that helped prepare her for college and worked as a tutor for the same after-school program as Nicki. She also obtained support from her mother and older sisters in order to navigate high school.

Tatiana is a seventeen-year-old high school senior who identifies as a low-income, middle class Black female. Throughout her time at Willow Glen High School, she was enrolled in both AP courses and in general courses, however, the AP courses were mainly English/Comp courses. While at Willow Glen High School, Tatiana focused on taking as many history and/or social studies courses since her passion is in African American studies and learning about "the middle east" and religion. Her hope was to go on to graduate school to one day be become a historian and write her own books and create documentaries.

When discussing her background, she spoke about growing up in a low-income household with her father being the main breadwinner and parent. She did not discuss her mother or whether she was involved in her upbringing. Her father had an associate's degree in multiple areas that included construction and theology. He had gone to community college where he received education for construction and then later decided to go back to school and learn about religion and become a pastor in the local community. Her father played a major role in helping Tatiana navigate high school as well as influencing her own passion in wanting to continue with her education beyond high school. While attending high school, Tatiana worked in the afternoons in the same after-school program as Nicki and her sister, which also played a major role in helping her prepare for college but also offered her with a paid position working with the youth in her community. She was also very much involved in multiple programs that prepared her for college.

Rosa is a fifteen-year-old low-income, middle-income, Latina who is a sophomore at Willow Glen High School. Throughout her time at the high school, she was mainly enrolled in AP prep courses. As later discussed, she mentioned wanting to take these courses to be better prepared for college and hopefully become a veterinarian. At her high school, she was involved in sports such as soccer and softball and in academic programs that focused on preparing students of color for college.

She spoke about growing up in a low-income household in the West Coast, where her mother managed the responsibility of parenting her and her brother, attending college, and holding a part-time job. Her mother had obtained a bachelor's degree, and had been working on completing her graduate degree. At the time of the interview, Rosa and her family had been living in Willow Glen for about three years. Rosa described her mother as being the main source

of support and the person who had always advocated for her and her brother when they had academic issues/concerns.

Liliana is an eighteen-year-old who identifies as middle-income, middle class, Latina and White, and a 2018 graduate of Willow Glen High School. She and her family had been living in Willow Glen for over 20 years and know the community well. Her mother and father were both college educated and held positions at a non-profit. Throughout the four years at WGH, Liliana was enrolled in all advanced courses. Since childhood, Liliana had been identified as a bright student and was often enrolled in advanced classes or in classes that were predominately White and with middle/upper middle-income students. Similar to her peers in the AP courses, Liliana had the opportunity to be involved in both academic and extracurricular activities since her early childhood that included band, gymnastics, after-school and weekend clubs.

According to her mother, Liliana was very aware of her own identity in relation to others and was able to understand a lot of racial issues existing within the community and the school. She considers herself a social and environmental justice advocate. She had been very vocal in school and in the community in speaking up about issues affecting her peers. As her mother, Carmen, would describe her, she was seen as a “troublemaker” by her high school principal for not being complacent with school policies and practices and openly demanding for a healthier school environment.

Kiki is a fifteen-year-old freshman who identifies as middle-income and as middle eastern female. During the time of her interview, Kiki was registered in all AP prep courses. She has a strong desire to one day become a physician and has already started preparing to be a viable applicant for an ivy league or a highly selective university. Aside from being enrolled in all AP

prep courses, she in involved in various extracurricular activities before and after school including swimming, band, student clubs, and music lessons.

Kiki is one of two children to immigrant parents. After her parents came to Willow Glen from the middle east about 20 years ago, they both attended community college and attained associate degrees. Her mother now works in the area of education and her father owns his own business within the community. Kiki's parents have lived in Willow Glen for about 20 years and have other family and close friends living within the community as well. Due to her parents not being fluent English speakers, Kiki felt like she could not rely on her parents to advocate for her and often self-advocated for herself while using her networks to learn about how to prepare for a future career as a doctor.

Carmen is a multi-racial, middle class, middle-aged woman and the mother of Liliana. She is an immigrant from a Latin American country but has lived in the U.S. since her early teens. She earned a doctoral degree and works in a non-profit business. Carmen grew up mainly poor due to issues of economic and political instability in her country of origin. However, due to her father obtaining an education and being involved in the army, they were able to live somewhat comfortably and travel around the world. Carmen is married and has lived in Willow Glen for approximately 24 years. She moved to Willow Glen due to job opportunities and close proximity to her husband's family. Like Carmen, her husband also holds a doctoral degree and works in a non-profit business. Aside from Liliana, Carmen and her husband also have a son who also attended and graduated from Willow Glen High School.

Manuel is a Latino, middle class, middle aged man. He came to the U.S. as an immigrant from a Latin American country during his teens and has lived in the U.S. since then. Like Carmen, he also came to Willow Glen for work opportunities at a nearby non-profit and has

lived there for about 24 years. He earned a doctoral degree and works at a non-profit. He had moved to Willow Glen with his son Aaron, who attended and graduated from Willow Glen High School a few years back. Manuel raised Aaron as a single parent and was able to successfully support and advocate for Aaron with the many raced-based issues that he would face while in school.

Role of the Researcher

In this study, I have taken the role of a researcher but from a social activist perspective. By examining inequities through this framework, my research uncovers the invisible ways that discrimination, oppression, and inequity continues to function through the use of colorblind choice practices.

Additionally, I conducted this research with the hope that through my research, I can bring about social change for students of color by providing a space for my participants to share their stories. My research aims to work toward empowering marginalized groups and transforming existing social injustices (Kinchloe & McLaren, 1994). Critical Race theorists feel compelled to conduct research as a way to challenge the oppression faced by certain groups (Bell, 1992, 2005; Bernal, 2002; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Decuir and Dixson, 2004; Gotanda, 1991; Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Tate, 1997Citation). They do not see their role as researchers as a choice but a personal responsibility to society.

Positionality as a Researcher

My positionality in being a woman of color but more specifically growing up as low-income, Mexican immigrant, who is a mother, a teaching assistant, and advisor is heightened in my study on tracking and thus the denial of a high-quality education and preparation for higher

education for students of color. In addition, my daughter's and my own experience in being tracked in middle and high school, make me more sensitive to the potential experiences that students will share when discussing the topic.

While my positionality in these circumstances pose as a challenge, it also serves as an advantage when interviewing students of color. For example, when talking with students about their experiences, some students felt comfortable sharing certain aspects of their life and educational experiences with me due to me being a person of color, a mother, and college student. However, I did not assume all the students would feel this way since I am an outsider from an educational institution coming into their space to interview them. These characteristics make me an outsider but also someone with power and privilege. In order to make my participants feel more comfortable in talking to me and not feeling like they are sharing everything with a complete stranger, I introduced myself and provided them with a little of my own background as a mother and college student before starting the interviews. In addition, because of my positionality, I was able to pick up on and critically analyze certain language, behaviors, and practices related to tracking and ability grouping when students talk about them. Although some of the students were not always aware of what specific language or lack of language means, I aimed to understand the invisible ways that students are othered within their schools.

Data Collection

I collected data using eight semi-structured interviews with students of color and parents. I audio-recorded interviews and transcribed the interviews for about a day and after each interview. By conducting and recording interviews with students and parents, I was able to present participants' experiences that go beyond a superficial report of surface phenomena

(Holloway, & Galvin, 2016). More importantly, as Bogdan and Biklen (2007) discuss, the information gathered from interviews and observations are puzzle pieces that ultimately allow the researcher to construct a picture representing participants realities.

I conducted the interviews with students and parents in Spring 2018 and Spring 2019 with the exception of one student who I interviewed in Spring 2017. Participant interviews lasted one to two hours and three student participants met for a second interview within a week after the first interview to answer follow up questions. Each personal interview began with a series of structured questions about their demographic information. The short answer questions made it possible for the participants and researcher to better transition to the in-depth questions about their experiences at WGH. While the structured questions provided important information for understanding the participant, the unstructured questions provided the rich data detailing the meanings behind students' everyday experiences. After each interview, I would write a quick summary of the overall interview and anything that stood out with regards to issues of race and racism as well as my thoughts in how students responded to some of their experiences.

In order to collect detailed data, I aimed to establish personal relationships with participants through various qualitative approaches. The interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis and in the homes of the participants, allowing for a natural and interactive dialogue between the researcher, student, and parent. During these interviews, each participant was given the opportunity to tell his/her life story. Similar to an autobiography, this method allowed participants to deeply reflect on their past as it relates to their identities and how they perceive different life events, react to, and interact with others (Harris, 2003). Throughout the interviews, I was also mindful that the participants' neutrality was not necessary and made efforts to allow

negotiation throughout the interview. The interview questions also offered an opportunity for me to get to learn more about each participant and their individual yet collective experiences.

Additionally, during my initial meeting with each participant, I shared my own story as a student and mother and allowed them to ask questions about my own experience with navigating school. I also shared the story of my daughter, who was close in age with student participants. I also allowed participants to ask questions and/or make comments about things that I shared with them. Sharing both my daughter's and my own personal story served as a method of transparency between the researcher and participants.

Data Analysis

All information from the interviews were then transcribed into field notes. As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) indicate, field notes are written accounts of what the researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study. Field notes that include thick descriptions serve to illustrate or substantiate the story being told. In their quest for understanding, qualitative researchers try to analyze and report the data with all of its "richness as closely as possible to the form in which they were recorded or transcribed" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 5).

After transcribing the audio recorded interviews into field notes, I wrote a one-to-two-page summary for each participant, highlighting some of the main topics and experiences they discussed during their interviews. The summary also allowed me to determine whether each the main topics for each participant aligned with my research questions. I then returned to each participants' transcript and used inductive data analysis to code the transcripts. Transcripts were read line by line and open coding was utilized by categorizing students descriptions of specific interactions with their peers, teachers, counselors, with school practices including registration,

class assignments, as well as interpretations of these events (see Table 3.6). This process led to a development of a variety of broad themes that were later collapsed into more specific overarching themes.

After organizing the data, four focused themes that were closely related to the overall research questions and to the CRT tenets (racism is endemic, whiteness as property, colorblindness, interest convergence, counter-storytelling, intersectionality) were created. The focused themes that emerged were based on the racial and class consequences of the use of freedom of choice in course enrollment for students of color. More specifically, the four main themes relate to the often hidden social and institutional factors that perpetuate racial and class segregation and inequity for students of color through the use of choice in course enrollment.

Table 3.6
Research Questions, Data Sources, and Analysis

Research Questions	Data Collection Method	Data Sources	Methods of Analysis
1) What institutional factors (e.g. guidance counselors, teachers, tests, peers, etc.) are influencing students' academic decisions and outcomes?	Semi-structured Interviews	Interview transcripts with students and parents of color	*Analysis of audio transcriptions - Categorized pieces of texts into themes: student and parent descriptions of specific interactions with their peers, teachers, counselors, with school practices including registration, class assignments, as well as interpretations of these events
2) How does the intersection of race and class influence students' academic choices, opportunities, and perceptions of themselves and their peers?	Semi-structured Interviews	Interview transcripts with students and parents of color	*Analysis of audio transcriptions - Categorized pieces of texts into themes: student and parents descriptions of specific interactions with their peers, teachers, counselors, with school practices including registration, class assignments, as well as interpretations of these events

Summary of Chapter

In this chapter, I introduce the qualitative research design for the study and detail the strategies employed in data collection, analysis, representation and reporting of outcomes. I highlight the use of individual interviews with students and parents to address the research questions guiding this study. Further, I discussed the role and positionality of the researcher and the tensions and issues that appeared in the field. In the next chapter, I provide an in-depth description of the institutional and social factors influencing students' academic choices from the perspectives of students and their parents.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter provides a critical description of the results from the semi-structured interviews that took place during the 2017, 2018, and 2019 spring semesters with both students and parents. The data is presented in themes and focuses on answering the first and second research questions: 1) What institutional factors (e.g., guidance counselors, teachers, tests, peers, etc.) are influencing students' academic decisions and outcomes? 2) How does the intersection of race and class influence students' academic choices, opportunities, and perceptions of themselves and their peers?

The following themes: 1) Tracked Choices: Enrolling in advanced placement courses as students of color, 2) Lack of Diversity in AP courses: "It's always the same students," 3) Racism within the AP courses: "Dang, I go to school with a lot of racist White kids," 4) Academic Success: "Whiteness equals intelligence," represent concepts of CRT like colorblindness, interest convergence, whiteness as property, racism is endemic, intersectionality, all of which are examined through students counter-stories that explain how their academic choices continues to be influenced by structural and social factors. Moreover, the counter-stories shared in this section provides insight on how freedom of choice in course selection continues to be influenced by colorblind practices that impact students' ability to freely make important academic decisions in enrolling and succeeding in AP courses. These normalized practices inhibit students of color from fully engaging in and securing equitable schooling opportunities and outcomes. By placing students' experiences at the center of my analysis, their experiences "provide important insights into the ways that schools structure inequality" through everyday practices (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2017). Students' experiences shed light on the structural inequalities embedded in the implementation of choice practices as a detracking and

desegregating effort. For example, data suggest that students' choice in course enrollment is shaped by race and class. For example, the data illustrates that race and class influences the process of who will/will not gain access to advanced placement courses, who can/cannot stay enrolled in AP courses, and how the responsibility for succeeding in these courses primarily falls on the hands of students and parents of color. Therefore, the experiences of students of color serve to counter the district's and school's claim that choice practices are beneficial to all students because of their race neutral appearance and application and its "effort to detrack courses" (Bell, 2004; Dixson, Rousseau Anderson, & Donnor, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Solórzano & Yosso, 2016).

Tracked Choices: Enrolling in advanced placement courses as students of color

Willow Glen High School prides itself in preparing all of its students for college through its "college track" courses (general courses) and the Advanced Placement tracks and courses. They publish the list of courses in their handbook for interested students and parents. During the annual high school visit event, where middle school students and parents visit the high school to meet the teachers and learn about course options, and by looking over the student handbook, students and parents learn that unlike other school districts, who require students to meet specific pre-requisites for enrollment in Advanced Placement courses, at Willow Glen High School, students have the freedom to choose to enroll in any of the advanced courses including the AP preparatory courses. Students can enroll in the AP preparatory courses as early as middle school and in the AP courses during junior and senior year. To any person looking over the handbook or listening to advisors discuss the various opportunities that students have to further their knowledge and college preparation, Willow Glen High School, seems like a progressive school that is focused on equity and inclusion for all its students. However, when examining the

individual experiences of students of color, it appears that their freedom to choose to enroll in advanced courses was largely influenced by their racial and class standing within the school and community.

As argued by social reproduction theorists and CRT scholars, schools are places that reproduce social inequities by upholding the dominant views of ability and merit (Bell, 1992, 2005; Bourdieu & Passeron 1990; Bernal, 2002; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Delgado & Stefaniec, 2001; DeCuir and Dixson, 2004; Gotanda, 1991; Harris, 1993; Karl & Katz, 1987; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2003; McDonough 1997; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Tate, 1997). Scholars who challenge the myth of meritocracy by arguing that hard work alone does not guarantee academic access and success for all students. Instead, their social and economic standing within society is what determines access and success within schools (Crenshaw, 2007; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; DeCuir and Dixson, 2004; Gotanda, 1991; Tate, 1997). Students who fit the dominant views of what is seen as deserving and hardworking, are those who are White, with college educated and middle- and upper-income and middle-class parents. Similar to what is described by social reproduction theory and CRT, the relative positions that students and parents of color held in the Willow Glen community and within WGH had a significant influence on whether their choices for enrolling in advanced courses were accepted/denied and whether they gained access to an education that would challenge them and prepare them for college. This was evident for Rosa, Manuel's son, and Kiki's friends, who were all Latino and at different times in their academic experience, struggled to gain access to the pre-requisite courses or AP courses.

In Rosa's case, her mother, who is Latina and low-income but middle class, due to her level of education, struggled to get Rosa registered into the AP prep algebra 1 course offered at the middle school that feeds into WGH. Rosa mentioned:

When I was in 8th grade, my mom tried to register me for algebra 1, but the advisor denied her request, saying it was too late to move up to algebra 1. It was during the first few weeks of school too, but I had no other choice but to stay enrolled in the math course I was in.

What was more frustrating for Rosa was later learning that she and her mother could have demanded that Rosa be placed in the advanced level course. Rosa's mother thought that their policy for requesting to be placed into a higher-level course was set and was adopted equally amongst all students. However, later in high school Rosa and her mother learned about other parents that demanded the same and were allowed to switch into the higher-level course after the schools deadline. Not allowing students like Rosa to enroll in the AP prep algebra 1 course greatly impacts their future access to AP courses and more importantly, the opportunity to a challenging education. The lack of access to a more challenging course was clear when Rosa discussed her frustration with taking the regular math course.

Rosa: The material from the math course was the same material that my 7th grade class in California had covered. It was a waste of time to sit through the class and re-learn everything I had already learned the year before. This course was so easy that I was getting bored and annoyed that I was not learning anything new. Even my grade showed that I was capable of doing well in algebra 1 but getting an A was not enough to get moved into the algebra 1 course.

Not only was Rosa missing out on learning new and challenging material, but she would later learn that in order to start the AP math track at WGH, she needed to have completed the AP prep algebra 1 in middle school; something that was not discussed in the middle school handbook or brought up by her middle school advisor. The process for preparing for the AP math courses at the high school starts at the end of sixth grade, when teachers and counselors decide which students will be placed in the AP track for math. In 7th grade, students placed into pre-algebra 7 are then allowed to enroll in the AP prep algebra 1 course in 8th grade, which then provides them access into the high school AP courses throughout their four years of high school. The denial of Rosa's placement in the AP prep algebra 1 course meant that she would not be able to move out of the regular track and into an AP course until senior year; limiting her options to be better prepared for college and a future career that requires strong math and science skills. When discussing the process of registering for the 8th grade Algebra 1 course and its impacts, Liliana mentioned the following:

Researcher: Did you take the AP prep algebra 1 course during 8th grade?

Liliana: So, I think in 7th grade, I got, you know at the end of the school year, you got a paper in one of your classes. I got a paper and AP prep algebra 1 was already circled and so for some people it was either circled or yours wasn't and that determines whether you got in or not.

Researcher: Did you have an opportunity to talk about your classes with the advisor and your mom and your dad or was it decided that one day?

Liliana: I think it was kind of decided. I don't think there was much discussion. I think it was pretty decided for me what classes I was going to take. From the end of sixth grade, it was basically decided if you would get into the AP math or not, unless you took it over

the summer. But that takes more effort. I was in AP prep algebra 1, which was freshmen math. So basically, if you're in that, then you'll end up in AP math like AP stats, or calc ab, bc, and if you're not, then you take algebra 1 freshman year and there's no chance. There's no way for you to get to the take the actual AP math class. You'll just take algebra 1, geometry, algebra 2, pre-calc trig.

Liliana described the process that is illustrated in Figure 3.3. Once a student is placed into the AP math track during middle school, they are more likely to receive an education that prepares them to enroll and pass the AP exam during their junior/senior year. For those who do not get placed into the AP prep courses in middle school, their chances to move up and out of the regular math courses and into an AP math course becomes nearly impossible. Similar to Willow Glen High School, at Willow Glen Middle School, about 40% or more of students are low-income and students of color who do not understand the effects of their course placement on their future access to college preparatory courses. All the participants in this study stated that their middle school counselors never met with any of the students or parents to discuss course options and the effects that different level math courses have on high school course options. Instead, students are given their schedule at the end of each semester and given a short period of time to challenge their placement. If a student wanted to make changes to their course schedule, they would have to go through the process of scheduling a meeting with their advisor, their teacher, and possibly the principal.

While few students of color are able to gain access to the AP prep algebra 1 course, the students of color who were placed in this course still faced barriers enrolling in the AP track in high school. When speaking with Kiki, she shared that her best friend, who is also Latina, was enrolled in AP prep algebra 1 during 8th grade and successfully passed but was not allowed to

enroll in the next AP prep course in ninth grade by the high school advisor. In the following excerpt, Kiki describes the process that her friend went through to be allowed into the AP prep course in 9th grade.

Kiki: I was so shocked to learn that my best friend, Carla, was denied entry into the AP prep Geometry class during 9th grade. Like, she had taken AP prep algebra 1 during 8th grade, and passed the class with an A, but they did not allow her to enroll in the AP prep Geometry class. I thought that if a student took the AP prep courses and got the grades they needed, they would automatically get placed in the next AP prep course. When she talked with the high school advisor, she told her that there was nothing she could do and that she could not take the AP prep geometry course. Her parents were really upset and scheduled a meeting with the principal, who basically interviewed them and then she was able to add the math course, but they had to demand for it.

According to the high school curriculum planner, Carla should have been eligible to continue with the AP prep courses. However, the unspoken rules behind the criteria for “eligible” students became more ambiguous and problematic in the denial of well performing students of color like Carla and Rosa. In order to gain access to the next AP prep course, Carla and her family would have to challenge her placement in the regular course with the high school advisor and the principal, who had them undergo an interview process to determine whether Carla was indeed “deserving” of gaining access to the AP prep courses. While the real reasons behind the initial denial of Carla remains unknown, these incidents continued to primarily affect students of color.

Another student who faced a similar experience was Manuel’s son, Aaron. Manuel, who is Latino, middle-income and middle class, tried to advocate for his son to be placed in a higher-

level Spanish course that would later give him access to the AP Spanish course, but was met with resistance from the Spanish teacher. The teacher had her own guidelines for accepting requests for placement in the higher-level courses. According to Manuel, his son who is a native Spanish speaker, was placed in a lower-level Spanish course that was too easy and as a result was becoming bored and not performing to his fullest potential. The following excerpt illustrates the process that Manuel went through in trying to advocate for his son to gain access to a higher-level course that challenged and prepared him for the AP Spanish course and exam.

Manuel: I went to talk to the teacher, and she said that he wasn't doing well enough. "He knows the language, but he cannot perform in grammar," and therefore that's why they're flunking him. The argument that I was having with her was that his proficiency was much higher and that he was getting bored and that's why he was getting "bad grades." So, she was saying, "Yeah, but if he has bad grades, I can't jump him because he's not doing well," and I said, "but he's doing bad because he's bored," and so we were going back and forth.

Then the lady said that he had gotten a 78% on a surprise test she gave him, and the test was really the final exam for the whole year, and she was saying, "Well, he flunked it." I looked at the lady and I told my son, "You know what, you did really, really well. They gave you a test that you weren't expecting. They gave you a test with no preparation at all and you got a 78% on the test and the lady said that you flunked it. It's ridiculous." It was a C+ but supposedly to be able to jump him to the next level he had to have a higher score. I wanted him to be in a higher Spanish level course and she wouldn't do it. I brought him to the university, and he took the placement exam and then he placed in the 3rd or 4th level of Spanish when he was "flunking" 9th grade Spanish at the high

school. I just didn't deal with the lady anymore. He was coming to the university, taking classes here and going back to the high school, so it was great, but you know this was ridiculous. He started doing really well, when he was still in high school. He was taking literature classes and he was acing them. He was getting A's in the classes at the university level and he couldn't get an A in the Spanish class over there.

Unlike White students at the school who primarily enjoy access to the AP tracks, Manuel, Rosa, and Carla's requests to move into the AP courses or courses leading up to an AP class were all initially denied. From his previous experience with White teachers and administrators at Willow Glen High School and in other schools, Manuel was aware that because of his race, his requests would be met with resistance or ignored. His mistrust in the school led him to take it upon himself to secure better opportunities for Aaron. Not knowing her daughter's and her own rights as a parent in a new school and district, Rosa's mother accepted the counselor's response, later learning that she could have demanded more and taken her request to the principal. On the other end, Carla's parents challenged the advisor's decision by requesting a meeting with the principal and demanding she gain access to the AP prep math courses.

The experiences of these students being denied access to the AP prep courses or courses leading up to them was a common occurrence at both the middle and high school. From conversations with Liliana's mother, Carmen, the issue of course placement in AP courses, was a practice largely affecting students of color at these schools. When discussing the academic issues she saw while her children were enrolled at Willow Glen Middle and High School, Carmen discussed her disapproval with some of the racist practices.

Carmen: The middle and high school limited how many kids could be in the AP prep track. Parents of color would often have to advocate for things to be more fair. But there

were friends, where parents had to advocate cuz they were expecting to be put in there and then they were suddenly not in them. They demanded they opened more slots in these courses.

The few friends of color that Liliana had would be the ones who would often struggle with gaining access into the advanced level courses, even when they enrolled in pre-requisite courses. The excuse was often that these courses had limited seats and could not accommodate all students. However, when looking at the demographics of students enrolled in these courses at WGH and as later discussed by participants (see Table 4.1), it was clear that the priority of the school was to accommodate the educational choices of White middle-income and middle-class students over students of color. Out of a total population of 1,185 (refer to Table 3.1), White students represent 36% of the student population at Willow Glen but about 47% of total AP enrollment rates when compared to Black 38 % (7% in AP courses), Latino 13% (6% in AP courses), and Asian 4% (23% in AP courses) students.

Table 4.1
 2018-2019 Willow Glen High School Early College Coursework Enrollment

	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12	Total
Total Students Taking Early College Courses	n/a	12	79	117	208
% of Students Taking Early College Courses	n/a	4%	27.5%	43%	17.20%
Advanced Placement					
Students Taking One or More AP Courses	n/a	n/a	78	102	
Low Income	n/a	n/a	24	41	
White	n/a	n/a	40	53	
Black	n/a	n/a	n/a	15	
Hispanic	n/a	n/a	n/a	11	
Asian	n/a	n/a	13	14	
Dual Credit					
Students Taking One or More DC courses	n/a	n/a	n/a	60	
Low Income	n/a	n/a	n/a	30	
White	n/a	n/a	n/a	35	
Black	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	
Hispanic	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	
Asian	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	

Source: Drawn from the State Board of Education: State Report Card. High School Snapshot of 2018-2019.

The experiences of Rosa, Carla, and Aaron illustrate the often hidden and unequal practices that some parents and student of color underwent in order to try to gain access to AP and AP prep courses. More importantly, these sorts of practices show the unequal access to courses that have remained majority White and middle-income and middle class and how choices are often limited by administrators and teachers at schools who utilize unequal practices to control access to the AP courses. Moreover, these experiences show that the AP (including AP prep) courses serve as the property of Whites and in many ways continue to be protected by White parents and school administrators through colorblind choice practices that operate as a form of racial segregation within the schools.

Lack of diversity in AP courses: “It’s always the same students”

One of the main factors influencing students’ choices to enroll and complete advanced courses was often attributed to the lack of diversity within their classes. When examining the experiences of students of color, the difference in diversity in advanced courses meant more than having more people of color. The lack of diversity in the AP courses shaped students' everyday experiences with their teachers, peers, and thus their academic decisions.

During their interviews, all student participants discussed being one of a few students of color in their AP classes and how socioeconomic status and class stood out amongst these courses. When discussing their observations on the types of students in the AP courses, Liliana, Angela, Tatiana, Kiki, and Rosa shared the following:

Liliana: For most of them [AP classes], they were pretty split evenly between men and women. I think for most of my classes, like AP Spanish, we were all girls, AP environmental science, we were all girls. That was interesting. But for the sciences, for the STEM field, it was pretty split evenly and then race wise, it was more White. Our school was 40% Black, and the AP class was nowhere near 40% Black and so that was a stark difference. The students of color tended to be more in the middle or upper middle class when compared to the rest of the population. I didn’t really think about it much because that’s how my classes have always looked. Obviously when I got to like junior or senior year, it became a little more White, but it was always kind of like that.

Angela: It’s White kids and some Black kids. But I can say that the Black kids that you see, their parents are like mine. Not bougie but they would have more money than the other Black kids in the school. Higher-and middle-class people are in AP classes. There might be a few higher-class, but it’s basically middle class.

Researcher: How many Black students are in that AP chemistry class?

Angela: Like 7 out of 30.

Rosa: It's mostly White and Black people. There's like never really any Mexicans.

There's just a few Asians because there's not a lot of Asians that go to my school.

Kiki also shared her experience in the AP courses, as well as what she observed in the regular/non-AP science class.

Kiki: So, I was in science class. I was in an AP prep science class, and I was taking a test and the teacher said I can stay after. The next class was not an AP prep science class, and so the next class came in and they're all African American kids in that class. I noticed in a lot of the regular classes that it's mostly African American people and like Hispanic/Latino. In the AP classes its more White. Social class, I really don't look at that but there are some kids in the AP class that have brand stuff. Like, they always have Supreme, Nike, Under Armor, Birkenstock, all those actual brand things like Hydro Flask water bottles and these amazing things, and air pods too. They always have air pods. I don't bring my air pods to school cuz I don't want to show off. I don't want to show off to kids cuz I think it's mean to kind of flex on people, like just showing off your brand stuff.

As seen in Table 4 and as discussed by the participants, students of color in the AP courses were often underrepresented and overrepresented in the regular courses. Being one of the few minority students within their AP courses, race was noticeable for students within these courses. For students who identified as Black/African American, they often saw a few more students from their racial group when compared to Rosa, Liliana, and Kiki, who were usually one of the two Latino/a and Middle Eastern students in their courses. However, all students often

felt like there were too few students of color in their AP courses when compared to the non-AP courses. In addition to these courses being majority White courses, more than half of students were also from middle-income and middle-class backgrounds. Students like Kiki could identify middle-income students by looking at the brand names on items they wore/owned. Another common way in which students learned about their peers' status were through peer conversations, where they discussed their parents' positions within the community. Below, Liliana, Rosa, and Tatiana describe what they often heard from their peers and friends in their AP courses.

Researcher: When you think back to the students in your AP classes, how were you able to tell what their socioeconomic status was?

Tatiana: Usually, in the AP classes, I see like most kids' parents work at the university. Cuz they say, "My parents, my dad, my mom works at the university, da da," and sometimes you can just kinda assume.

Rosa: I know some of them are because they say that they work at the university and stuff.

Liliana: So unfortunately, well, since we are near the university, and like especially growing up in this neighborhood, it has a lot of like professors and so a lot of my friends were like professors' kids too. So especially when I got to be in the uppers, like calc bc, you could definitely tell, there was definitely a disparity because it was kind of an anomaly. If your parents, this sounds really bad, if your parents did not work for or at the university, you did not enroll in these [AP] courses, and so that was like the biggest divide. A good bit of my friends mentioned that their parents were professors. A lot of

them, I just knew they worked at the University. A couple of them were high up. Some of them were even department chairs. Usually some sort of faculty.

As discussed by students, the majority of AP classes were not just made up of students with middle-income backgrounds but were students with strong connections to the nearby university. As Liliana observed, students' connection to the university served as a strong indicator for enrolling in the AP courses. This association was one that influenced the division of the school into two tracks; the AP track which serves the children of university professors and administrators, and the general track, also referred to by the school as the "college track," for students of color who are from low-income and lower-class families.

In many ways, this trend becomes normalized through the minimal interactions students have with other students outside of their tracks. For students, who from middle school have been in the regular or advanced classes with the same type of students, the racial and class segregation between them becomes part of their academic experience. As Liliana discussed in her interview, it took her some time to realize the stark racial and class difference between the AP and regular courses because she was surrounded by the same peers who would be the students she mainly interacted with. However, the lack of interaction between students carried over in other aspects of school such as extracurricular activities. In the following excerpt, Rosa and Liliana describe how the same patterns they observed between the AP and regular courses transferred into extracurricular programs.

Rosa: I feel like everyone's known each other for a long time and they all do like the same activities like band or sports, so they all know each other pretty well. Like all the band people, they're always the ones that are together and talking about band. They're always in the AP/AP prep classes, like it's always the same people.

Liliana: Yeah, it was mainly the same groups. Like especially, in middle school with the STEM class, which I talked about. In the STEM club, it was mainly the people that were in the higher tracks or going to be. With clubs in high school, it was more mixed but clubs like, I was in a club, Habitat for Humanity for senior year, the staff member is, he's an AP U.S. history teacher and recruits a lot of kids from his class which makes Habitat more AP. But there wasn't much diversity. There was definitely a lot of separation socially between us. I mean you can really split Willow Glen into two groups which is like the AP track and the non-AP track cuz the only, like I said, you're usually in all AP prep classes or like none. So, the only time you would interact with the other groups would be in lunch or PE and like maybe orchestra, a little bit but no, not even that. Well, that's another thing. Band is completely White; orchestra is pretty diverse. Band was basically all White and orchestra was pretty diverse. I don't know how that happened, but it happened. It's a stark difference. I have no idea but that's how it works out.

There is a clear pattern in the types of students enrolled in the AP courses but also in extracurricular activities at the school. Both Rosa and Liliana observed the racial segregation between the AP and non-AP courses but also noticed how the same type of segregation carried over into some of the other programs like band, where most of the students were from the AP courses and were majority White, middle-income, and middle class. Segregation was not only an issue between AP and non-AP courses but also in extracurricular programs like band and after-school clubs. This is concerning because as Liliana mentioned, there is very little opportunity for students to socialize with peers outside of their courses, which works to normalize the racial and class segregation and social factors that go along with these patterns. As we will see in the next theme, when students are segregated and do not have opportunities to interact with each other,

issues surrounding race and class become apparent within their academic experiences, negatively influencing their academic outcomes.

Racism within the AP courses: “Dang, I go to school with a lot of racist White kids”

For some of the participants, the racial makeup of their AP courses was not initially an issue. When students began engaging with their peers about race and racism in the U.S., they became aware of the effects that segregation and lack diversity within their classes had on their academic experiences within these courses. In the following section, Rosa, Nicki, and Tatiana discuss some of their experiences in their AP and AP prep English and Literature courses.

In her AP prep social studies course, Rosa was one of the two Latina students with a few Black students. Although Rosa noticed a lack of diversity in the number of students and teachers of color in her AP prep courses, it became an issue when a student teacher came into her class to discuss the factors influencing Mexican immigration to the U.S. In the following excerpt, Rosa describes her experience with the student teacher and the material that she and her peers would learn and have to engage with.

Rosa: We did this assignment in social studies and we have student teachers this semester and one of our assignments was to... we're learning about immigration and it came into like Mexicans crossing the border and drug dealing and stuff and so what our student teacher had us do was pretend we were like part of that “culture” and like in a gang and the person wasn't giving us our money, so we had to write them a threat letter. Honestly, I don't understand how that helped us understand immigration from Mexico. I guess cuz were learning about the drug war and immigration, so I guess in a way he was probably trying to get us to be like, why some people turn to gangs and stuff or like what we would

think it would be like if we were in one. But I don't really see how that would, because that could be offensive to a whole lot of people.

Researcher: Did you feel uncomfortable when they were talking about that?

Rosa: Yeah, it kind of felt uncomfortable and like the students around me, they don't understand and so they were just like saying, I guess in a way they felt rude to me cuz they were just like, "I could start off the letter by saying this and this."

Researcher: What did they say?

Rosa: "I don't know how to write Hispanic. Can you please give me my money?" or like, "Can we cuss in this letter?" or saying these really dumb comments. It didn't really affect them or matter to them in any way... and then we had a debate in class, and I guess that's kind of when it started but I refused to participate in the debate. Like everyone in my group was talking and we were going back and forth but by the time class was over, I didn't talk at all and like I was trying to, as long as possible, to postpone myself from talking because I was against it and it's like basically going against myself in a way. So, I didn't want to and didn't feel comfortable talking.

Researcher: What was the debate about?

Rosa: It was about whether or not we should build a bigger border wall and my student teacher divided the class into two halves and so one side was for and against the wall.

Researcher: What did you mean when you said going against yourself?

Rosa: Because like for me like my mom was born here in the United States and everything but like my dad he was, he's from Mexico and then he came here, so it's like, the only reason I'm here it's because of that reason and I see it like going against myself

because without, if my dad didn't come here, I probably would have never been born so I didn't see a reason for me to participate in it.

Being one of a few Latina students made this experience very difficult for Rosa because as she mentioned, no one else understood what exactly was being taught and why this material was problematic. None of her peers could relate to her frustration with the material and activity that furthered the racist rhetoric of Mexicans as drug dealers, gangsters, and criminals. The material also created a single story behind why Mexicans immigrate to the U.S. While the student teacher and the main teacher may have been unaware of the offensive nature of the assignment, it created a climate in the classroom where White students made inappropriate comments that made Rosa feel frustrated and invisible. Unable to express her frustration to the teacher and peers, she waited until she got home, where she shared the news with her parents, who then advocated on her behalf.

After Rosa's mother reached out to her teacher and expressed her disapproval of the material, the teacher simply excused Rosa from doing the assignment but never apologized nor changed the assignment for the rest of the class. The student teacher would continue to be allowed to return and teach on this and other similar topics in the course. The teachers, who were both White, did not think this material was racist and demeaning but instead as colorblind material that offered all students the opportunity to learn about current political and social issues concerning Mexican immigration. Their lack of cultural awareness of this group and culturally appropriate ways of teaching showed little concern for how this could potentially impact Latino students in the course and how their peers might view them and other Latinos. For Rosa, these sorts of experiences within the AP and AP prep English courses clearly affected her self-esteem

but also her participation and learning in this course. When discussing whether the teacher's race mattered, Rosa stated the following:

Rosa: Depending on the teacher and how the teacher is, like my English teacher, I feel like her personality and how she is affects peoples learning.

Researcher: What do you mean?

Rosa: They think that they can say anything and say it's educational.

After this incident, Rosa did not care to engage in the course again. She disliked the teacher and her way of teaching that it made it hard for her to learn. It also created an environment where Rosa did not feel safe to speak up due to the comments that her peers and teacher made. Her teacher had no educational knowledge of issues surrounding groups of color and believed she could teach on these topics without any consequences. Her lack of remorse and empathy made it clear to Rosa, that she did not care about her as a person and student, nor how this topic affected the other Latina student in the course. If anything, these experiences lead students of color to see their teacher and peer as racist and people they cannot trust or depend on for support.

Like Rosa, Nicki and Tatiana also shared a similar experience in their AP literature class (English course). Nicki and Tatiana, who were two of out of four Black students in their class, often felt like issues of race and racism were never discussed with awareness of the students of color in the class. In the following excerpt, Nicki describes what she did not like about her AP course and its connection to an event where her peers and teacher acted out a scene from a book on African Americans.

Nicki: What I don't like is that we have to deal with in AP lit. We have to deal with sensitive subjects like race. I feel like, me being, there are four of us that are Black in that

class. Four girls and the rest of them are White people, and everyone was touchy on the fact that they, the White people. I'm just going to say it. They were, they didn't really care. So, we were talking about, like relationships or something in the book and then she [the teacher], out of nowhere came up with slavery and the chain gang and all that stuff and she acted it out with a bunch of White people [students in the class].

They bent down like they were in cages and they got up and had extension cords wrapped around their ankles, as chains. So, she was talking about it and they all acting it out. Basically, walking and stuff in the motion, with the chains, and it was just something inappropriate. Like, there was no point with what we were talking about. It came out of nowhere. It's something serious that you shouldn't take as a joke. Even if y'all thought it was. Even if y'all didn't think that, like, it could hurt somebody. Even if you didn't do it intentionally. It does not matter. Like you just don't do that. I don't think they were trying to be offensive, but they just didn't care.

They were asking me how I felt and I'm like, stuff like that, in that subject, you don't play about that. You don't laugh about that because that stuff really happened. Y'all doing chains and using all this and using all that to make props and that stuff really happened and you need to take it seriously.

What was most upsetting for Nicki was that these actions were unrelated to the class discussion and having both the teacher and peers pretend to be slaves and laughing while acting the scene out was seen as insensitive and disrespectful. The lack of awareness from her teacher and peers led Nicki to join the other three Black students from the course and report the incident to the principal and the deans. In the following excerpt, she describes her frustration in needing to address this issue with her teacher and principal.

Niki: So, we talked to the principal and our deans and stuff, and it was like a weeklong process. We were going through a lot of stuff. Had to take me out of class to meet with them and they asked me how I felt about the class. I don't want to say anything racist about them because they're not. I'm just, stuff like that needs consideration. But my teacher did apologize to me personally because she knew who it was that felt that way. Like we all came to the principal, so she knew it was us that felt that way, so she apologized and stuff.

Researcher: Did the teacher seem like she had any awareness of the issue when it happened?

Nicki: She didn't think about it until after we brought it up. After we brought it up, she was like, "I really did not intend" and her eyes were watery.

As mentioned by Nicki, this incident was frustrating and hurtful for her and the other Black students who have a personal connection to slavery; something that her White peers cannot fully understand nor relate to. As Nicki stated:

"They don't really care...They really don't get it. I have grandparents and great grandparents that lived through slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation and we still have to deal with racism all the time."

Unfortunately, this would not be the last time she would have to deal with similar issues in this course. It became so common that she began to hate the debates because it led to arguments between White and Black students in the class. However, in her non-AP social studies course, her teacher was more responsive to racist comments and seemed more aware of how to discuss these issues in the course. In the following section, Nicki describes a discussion about police brutality and the way in which her teacher responded to it.

Nicki: When I had social studies for junior year, we had debates about police brutality, and I would hate when White people talked because you have these ignorant ones that will say the dumbest stuff. My teacher, he was a White teacher, but he knew. He almost dang near Black to me. Like, anything that anybody would say, my teacher started defending us. A White boy said, we were talking about police brutality or something and he said, he was like it's a Black person's fault or something. You know, I was ready to go off.

Researcher: So how did your teacher address it?

Nicki: My teacher was saying like, basically, it's in the wrong for White police to treat Black people that way. He was just very defensive towards that stuff. He felt like you should talk with people and not shadow the fact or try to cover racism up because it's not gone away. It's like a scar. It's still going to be there even if it healed up. Like slavery and stuff. I mean we got away from it. We're good now but it's not something that still, that's just going to be gone. And it still happens. Like just cuz were not picking cotton or were not getting beat, similar stuff still happens.

When compared to her English AP teacher, Nicki described her social studies teacher as being almost Black. His awareness of racial issues and the way in which he approached students' racist comments made Nicki feel like she could trust her teacher to address the situation. While she disliked some of the comments made by students, she knew that they would not go unchallenged by the teacher, which helped her better deal with working with specific students in her non-AP class. These courses would be one that she would greatly enjoy due to the support and awareness from her teacher.

Tatiana, who was Nicki's friend and one of the four Black students in the AP literature course, recalled another debate that took place in their course that focused on African Americans being servants. These debates as well as other experiences within the AP courses, made her aware of the racism amongst her peers and within these courses.

Tatiana: I've never like experienced that type of stuff before, until I was in that type of class, because in middle school, you don't really have like an AP class. You're just put into a class. But I was like, dang, I go to school with a lot of racist White kids, and I never knew that!

Researcher: You found this out in you advanced class?

Tatiana: Yeah, in my AP class I found that out. Like my teacher freshman year, my teacher, well sophomore year too. Dang! But freshman year, really, I first realized it. Like I remember we had read a chapter and my teacher was like, "Okay, I'm going to ask you questions and you go to this side of the room if you disagree or you agree," and I don't know, she had said something like, something about race or something. So, it's like only three other Black people in the class anyway. But yeah, we had an argument. This one girl and Nicki.

Like okay, I guess we were reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and one of the students said, "A lot of people had servants that were Black," like dada-dada-da, all type of stuff. Nicki, was like, "Well, okay that's still not right. You can't justify that's right, that they had Black servants, even if they were getting paid or not, that's still a form of like ownership over these people, Black people." They were trying to argue that it was okay for them to have servants. It's okay to have Black servants. There were a lot of arguments like that.

Researcher: What would you say during those arguments?

Tatiana: Me? I mean, I was really shy freshman year, so I really didn't really say nothing. Sometimes, I would say something. Sometimes, I would say, why is this kid so frustrated? Like, why are you so ignorant? And you have to say something but most of the time I didn't say anything. If I was in that class now [loudly sighing].

Researcher: Do you think it would have been different if it wasn't an AP class?

Tatiana: If I wasn't in the AP class and the discussion was going off, I would have said something. Yeah.

Researcher: How would that have changed anything?

Tatiana: In the AP classes, most times, your voice doesn't matter. We'll say something but like they don't care. They don't care. But in the regular class, I don't know. Maybe it's because you have more of a like a support system, a backup system. In the non-AP classes. Especially from the teacher. Also, you can tell if a teacher agrees or they don't. Most teachers in my non-AP class, if somebody says something, they like wouldn't agree to it.

Researcher: Do the teachers support what students say against racist or ignorant comments?

Tatiana: Yeah, they put facts behind what you say.

Similar to Rosa and Nicki, Tatiana also felt like her White peers and teachers in the AP courses were ignorant to issues of race and racism within these courses. Unlike Nicki, Tatiana never spoke up against some of her peers' statements due to feeling like her voice and those of her Black peers did not matter. Among various factors, feeling racially isolated and emotionally vulnerable led Tatiana to drop out of the AP English course and enroll in a regular non-AP

course, where she felt she had a support system. Having a teacher that not only speaks up against racist and ignorant comments, suggests that her teachers in the non-AP courses are culturally competent and taking a direct stance in addressing racism within the classroom. In the general courses, some teachers create a safe learning environment that does not oppress students of color but fosters respect and intellectual growth.

As discussed earlier, lack of diversity in courses goes beyond just having more students of color enrolled and more about how lack of diversity affects classroom environment with regards to student and teacher interactions, class material, and learning outcomes for students of color. In the predominately White and middle-income AP courses, where the teachers were also all White, students and teachers' actions and comments about race was often hurtful and disrespectful to students of color. The material on race and the ways in which teachers taught was often seen as problematic, leading to arguments between students of color and White students, and leaving students of color feeling frustrated and invisible. Therefore, students are not just affected by what their peers say and do but also by the ways in which their White teachers have very little knowledge on how to teach a class that is not all White, middle-income, and middle class. Their lack of interaction with students of color can be seen to largely impact their own ways of teaching and the material covered/not covered in the AP class.

Academic Success: "Whiteness equals intelligence"

Once students of color were able to gain access to advanced courses, they quickly learned that their success in these courses were not always supported. While they were made aware of the difficulty in advanced courses by teachers, peers, and counselors, students of color would come to realize that their success was mainly their own responsibility. The support students received and not receive from their teachers, counselor, and peers as well as the competitive

environment within the AP courses, would ultimately determine their success and enrollment outcomes.

For most students of color enrolled in AP courses, access to a supportive teacher had a major impact on their learning and whether they continued to stay enrolled in the course. This was more critical for students who were born into low-income and lower-class families or who until recently had been from low-income and middle-class backgrounds. For example, Angela, who with Nicki, was raised in a low-income and lower-class household until their mother went back to college, largely relied on her AP math and AP chemistry teachers for academic support to pass and remain enrolled in these courses. In the following excerpt, Angela describes her experience with her AP chemistry and math teachers and the impact they each had on her performance and enrollment in these courses.

Researcher: What do you like AP chemistry class?

Angela: I like the teacher. I don't like the students. The class is a little challenging, but I work through it. I ended up with a B. That's a blessing.

Researcher: Was the teacher helpful?

Angela: Yeah, he was really helpful. I could go to him if I needed help with homework or if I needed extra review. He would stay after-school. He was always willing to help. Like, even if it's like his hall monitor duty, he'll let you come out there and talk to him and he'll help you with your work or whatever, or during his lunch or after-school or whenever you need. He's always helpful. That's what I like about him.

He told me that his goal is not to get me through the class, it's to get me through the class with an A and understanding the basics of chemistry and the whole class itself and I was like dang, cuz no teacher ever told me that.

Similar to her AP chemistry course, Angela would rely on the support of her AP algebra teacher. However, when her algebra teacher left, her success and decision to stay enrolled quickly changed. In the excerpt below, Angela describes how the change affected her performance and her decision to stay enrolled in this course.

Angela: Well, I was in Ap prep algebra 2, but I had to get out of that class because it was too much. In the beginning of the school year, I had one teacher and then he left and had to get another teacher. So, it was two different teaching styles, and it threw me off. Plus, they were going a little too fast. The first teacher taught at a descent pace but the other teacher, he did not teach at a descent pace. He was like fast. But switching the teachers definitely threw me off. My first teacher, he was very, he was nice. He was like, if I needed to make up a test, I'd come during lunch. The other teacher, because he took all his classes, he literally didn't have any free time. Like, every class period he had a class except for like one and that was his lunch. So, I could not really come to him for help unless it was after-school and after-school I have to go to work. That's what kind of threw it off too. At some point I just had to tell them[work], sometimes I'm going to have to stay after-school because, you know my classes and stuff.

But the teacher that was teaching me [the first AP prep algebra 2 teacher], I had him for my geometry class, and he taught everything good. I wish he was my teacher now. He was a nice teacher. He taught me just like how I liked it. It was perfect. Like if I needed him to slow down, he would slow down a little, but he also would still help the students. If I needed help, he would be willing to help me anytime. I feel like if you're an AP teacher, I feel like you need to be very helpful to students cuz it's an AP class.

They're going to need extra help and you have to be willing to give them extra help and sometimes some of those teachers aren't willing to give you extra help.

For Angela, having access to academic support from her AP teachers made all the difference in her success and continued enrollment in these courses. It meant a lot for her to see that her AP chemistry teacher was truly invested in his students' success by making himself available before and after school as well as throughout the day. He also made it clear to Angela, that it was his goal to get her and her peers through the course with an A and with the basic knowledge of chemistry. Unlike her algebra 2 AP prep course, where she was originally getting support from the previous teacher, the switch to a new teacher, who would not slow down when teaching and was not available for his students, led to Angela falling behind and eventually dropping down to a regular algebra 2 course. She had tried to seek help from the tutoring center for her AP prep Algebra 2 course, but it was a struggle for her to obtain support because her after-school job conflicted with the tutoring times. In addition, when Angela was able to obtain tutoring, it became more of a process for the tutor and herself, making tutoring less of a viable option. She described this process in the following statement:

“They would try to show me the way that he [the math teacher] teaches me but they had to teach themselves, so it was like going through a lot of stuff just to learn the subject.”

Similar to Angela, Rosa was enrolled in an AP prep course in which she was struggling to get support. Like many students who struggle in the AP/AP prep courses, she reached out to her counselor for advice. Rosa was reassured by her counselor that if she was struggling in any of her AP prep classes, she could just go back to her general classes. While it is important that students such as Rosa know their options, her academic counselor failed to consider other

important factors and resources to help her stay enrolled and succeed in her AP prep classes. In the following excerpt, Rosa describes what she was told by her counselor.

Researcher: Do they talk to you about ways or resources that will help you if you are struggling?

Rosa: Not really, like if you have, when you go in to see them, they'll look at your grades and be like, "Hey let's see if you can like try a little harder to get this grade up," but I think my counselor, one time, mentioned like tutoring but other than that it's not really like often.

Researcher: Does he tell you, "We should probably talk to your teacher" or does he tell you how you should approach your teachers when you are struggling with the material?

Rosa: No, they don't do that.

Her conversation with her advisor sends a clear message to Rosa that she is solely responsible for her progress and success in her classes and that if it is too much of a challenge then she can take regular classes. Generally, the message that student receive from their advisors is that when they are struggling in any course, the responsibility falls mainly on them and is looked at as a personal issue. Little attention is placed on ensuring that students from marginalized backgrounds have the resources to succeed in these courses. While her counselor gave her the option to drop down to a non-AP course, she looked for other options to stay enrolled in the course. She tried to reach out to her teacher and attend after-school tutoring. In the following excerpt, Rosa explains her frustration in struggling to obtain help from tutors and her math teacher.

Rosa: The teacher is there after-school, if you need help, but I feel like they're just like.... I feel like that's not enough to help me understand what's really going on.

Because when you get help after-school, there's other students there and it's not really like one on one. The teacher is just bouncing around to other kids.

Researcher: Were the other tutors helpful?

Rosa: I feel like they were helpful, but just for the homework. It was like just get the answer but not really explain it to me to where I'd understand it for a test or something.

Researcher: Is that how your teacher teaches?

Rosa: Yeah, I feel like that's also how it is cuz when they help you with homework, they just say do this like this.

Even when trying to seek help, academic support from her teacher and tutoring was not a viable option for the AP prep math course. Nevertheless, failure was not an option for Rosa and her mother, who took matters into her own hands. With the support of her mother and stepfather, Rosa was able to obtain private tutoring for her AP prep math class. While they were low-income, Rosa's mother, had a graduate degree and had connections and knowledge for hiring an affordable tutor. Aside from having a graduate degree, Rosa's mother had previous experience working in higher education and knew the importance of helping Rosa prepare for a health-related field and the requirements needed to be accepted into a veterinary program. These sorts of connections and knowledge from her mother, made Rosa's experience different from other low-income students, because normally low-income students are not always able to afford a tutor, know how to go about searching for a private tutor, and do not know the pre-requisites for preparing for a pre-health field. In addition, unlike other low-income students, Rosa did not have a job that interfered with tutoring or seeking after-school support from her teachers. Her experience was more similar to students with middle-income and middle-class backgrounds, such as Kiki, Liliana, and Manuel's son, Aaron.

Students like Liliana, Kiki, and Aaron, who were from middle-income and middle-class backgrounds, rarely relied on teacher support. Their success in the AP and AP prep courses was largely shaped by their previous exposure and preparation for these courses as well as their out of school connections, which were largely shaped by their class status. In the case of Lily, both of her parents had earned graduate degrees and were able to offer her support in all areas critical for school. Unlike the other participants, Liliana, was one of the only participants that had been placed in advanced courses before attending high school. In addition, she also had access to the knowledge and skills that her parents had and continued to develop through their positions in higher education. When needed, she was able to lean on her parents and older brother for support in the areas of math, science, English and history. In addition, her upbringing and having been recognized as a bright student at an early age, placed her with other students, mainly White middle-income and middle-class students. Unlike the majority of students of color at her school, she was one of the few students of color, who was in all AP courses and one of the few that remained enrolled in all AP courses for her entire time at WGH.

Kiki, who was middle-income and middle class had college educated parents, had access to support from her brother and family friends, who were all college educated and could help her with homework when needed. With her busy schedule, it was hard for her to seek help from her teachers before or after school and instead obtained tutoring from a family friend who was in all advanced courses and could work with her around her schedule. While she could afford a tutor, having easy access to academic support within her social networks, allowed her to ensure her academic success in the AP courses and to prepare for medical school.

Aaron, who was also middle-income and middle class, had his father Manuel, who held a graduate degree and knew how to navigate higher education, provided him with the resources

and connections to secure a high-quality education for Aaron. Even when Aaron's teacher and school refused to provide him with access to the advanced courses, Manuel's status allowed him to easily navigate the process of registering Aaron at a university and connect him with resources to help him pass the college courses.

Overall, for students of color who were born into middle-income and middle-class families, their success in the AP prep and AP courses was not dependent on the support from their teachers and the schools, whereas students who were born into low-income and lower-class families that later became middle class, were more dependent on their teachers. When students like Angela, could not gain access to support within the AP classes and school, they were more likely to drop out of their AP courses and enroll in regular courses, where they did not have to depend on their teachers to succeed in the course. This was seen with other students like Nicki and Tatiana who were already enrolled in one or two AP courses but during senior year, ended up dropping their AP courses and enrolling in all general courses. Rosa, who is low-income and middle-income, had access to resources through her mother's connections, had to obtain tutoring outside of the school in order to remain enrolled in the AP prep math course. Unfortunately, the only way some of these students could secure their success was by dropping down to the general courses, which they often reported as easy and going too slow at times. This raises concerns because these students are not being provided with the same opportunities and access into college preparatory courses as their White middle-income and middle-class peers. Instead, they must stay enrolled in general courses or drop down from an AP course to general courses, where they know they can pass, get support, and not deal with a competitive and racist environment. However, the lack of challenge and preparation within some of these courses has consequences for students after they graduate. From the 2019 graduating class that went on to attend

community college, about 63% of WGH students ended up in remedial courses when compared to 39% of students from across Illinois (see Table 4.2). More concerning are the remedial rates in reading, math, and communication which were all almost twice as high when compared to other students within the state.

Table 4.2
Remediation Rates in Community College for 2019 WGH Graduates and Students Across the State

	% Post-Secondary Remediation
WGH Overall	63%
Reading	40%
Math	45%
Communication	30%
State Overall	39%
Reading	6%
Math	29%
Communication	19%

Source: Drawn from the State Board of Education: State Report Card. Community College Remediation 2019.

Academic support for underserved populations in AP courses is an issue that the school is well aware of and as a result created the Minority Enrichment Program. The purpose of this program is to support minority students enrolled in weighted courses (AP and AP prep courses) by providing them with additional services that include in-school academic monitoring, an after-school study center with tutors, enrichment activities such as content-based monitoring, leadership development, career seminars, and presentations from young professional speakers. While this program seem promising, no student of color in this study nor their friends had any knowledge of it, nor have been contacted by the program representative. It's merely a program that is published on the handbook but not fully carried out by the school.

The colorblind practice of allowing all students to enroll in AP courses through freedom of choice practices but not offer the needed academic support for low-income and students of color, shows the lack of effort the school is making to address issues of access and equity for marginalized students. By ignoring issues of race and class, it ensures that only those from higher income and higher-class families with college education and connections to resources, which are mainly from White middle-class families, are allowed to stay enrolled in these courses. DeCuir and Dixson (2004), argue that in understanding issues of equity, education leaders can recognize that the playing field for students of color is unequal to that of their White peers and thus should work to address issues of inequity. Instead, education leaders at this school look at the issue of college readiness as an issue of equality by making AP courses available to a few students of color without dismantling the issues that arise because of racism and classism.

Environment

The environment that students and teachers created within the AP courses largely influenced students' academic perceptions about themselves and enrollment decisions. Students of color often reported the environment within the AP classes to be too competitive and unsupportive that it affected their perceptions about themselves and their ability to openly ask for help.

For Tatiana, who was enrolled in AP English during her senior year, she often felt like she could not ask for help and did not feel smart enough to be in her AP class. Her perceptions were influenced from observations and experiences with other students and teachers in these courses. In the following excerpt, Tatiana describes her feelings and the interactions she had within the AP English course and how they influenced her perceptions of herself and the course.

Tatiana: Yeah, I just didn't like the teacher and didn't like the class, so I just got out of it.

Researcher: Did you feel comfortable asking questions?

Tatiana: No, I never. I really never asked questions in her class. I don't know. I hated that class actually.

Researcher: Why?

Tatiana: I don't know. The teacher. She made me feel dumb. I don't know. Like, basically you were on your own. She gave me directions on what to do and you have to do it. You have to figure it out on your own. You had to ask your neighbor and all that type of stuff. You can ask a question, but the responses were very brief and vague. Like, why couldn't you just say this like in a brief sentence or a brief word. I mean, I know it's advanced comp but like dang. Yeah, like if a student asked a question, she answered and everyone be like what, what does she mean, and they still didn't understand.

Researcher: If you were to compare AP comp to the regular classes, what was a major different between the two?

Tatiana: Most times it's with the teacher. The teacher [in the non-AP English class], she was less distant than in the AP class. Her personality was, she was a welcoming person. There's no like student teacher bond in the AP class, I felt. That's not all classes but most of the AP classes I have had, there's no student teacher bond.

Researcher: What is something that you liked about your regular classes.

Tatiana: I like my teacher. I feel like she's very down to earth. She makes you feel comfortable. I understand what she's talking about. If I don't get it, she'll explain it in a different way. She'll explain it in a different way, until I get it what she's saying. Like she gives examples. In the regular class, the teacher, like, talks to you, you know.

Researcher: What about the students? How are the students different in the regular class than the AP classes?

Tatiana: They don't brag about being smart or something like that. I just did not like the environment in the other [AP classes].

Researcher: So, you heard a lot of student bragging about being smart in the AP class?

Tatiana: Yeah, like they're in competition with each other.

Researcher: Did you always feel I like that was the environment in the AP class?

Tatiana: Uh huh. Like, you ever been in an environment with people, like, I don't know. I know I am very smart, and I know I'm very intelligent, but when you're around these people, I felt dumb in that class. I feel like some people believe that intelligence equals whiteness. Like, because you are not White, you are not seen as smart.

Researcher: You didn't feel like that in the regular classes?

Tatiana: Right!

Researcher: How does that make you feel about the AP and non-AP classes?

Tatiana: I mean sometimes because you feel so overwhelmed. Then you think, maybe I should go to that class [non-AP class] with all the Black people. Most of the Black people that are in that class [AP class] are boogie anyway. They think they're better than you.

Researcher: Have they talked to you in a certain way, looked at you in a certain way or not care to talk to you.

Tatiana: I guess not but they don't have to say it. If you're Black and in an AP class and have said, "I'm Black and I'm in an AP class" more than once, it's like you're trying to prove something. You can be just as smart as anybody else in an AP class and you being boastful does not change anything. Also, when Black people do come to an AP class, you

make people feel uncomfortable. Like they're not supposed to be there. You're supposed to be the only one.

For Tatiana, the competitive environment, the racial and class issues that existed within the AP class made her doubt her intelligence and made her feel like she did not belong in these courses. Similar to what Tyson, K., Darity, W., & Castellino (2005) found in their study, Tatiana, who was a strong achieving student, felt like she could not be seen as intelligent by her teachers and peers because as a Black woman, her identity went against the dominant discourse that argues that intelligence is equated to whiteness. Her AP teacher, who she described as distant and not welcoming, assigned homework with instructions so vague that she would have to ask others for clarity or struggle with her assignments. In addition, it was difficult to turn to her peers who, often bragged about being smart. With the few Black students in the AP classes, the class differences made Tatiana feel like the Black students were too bougie and were not as welcoming when compared to the Black students in the non-regular class. These circumstances made Tatiana feel so overwhelmed that she ended up dropping down to the non-AP English course where she felt more accepted and could comfortably approach her teacher for support.

Similar to Tatiana, the race of students in the AP classes and the expectations that went along with being enrolled in an AP courses influenced whether students like Angela openly sought support from their teachers. In the following passage Angela describes how she felt about seeking help in her AP classes.

Angela: Sometimes I be scared to ask questions because I be feeling slow because a whole bunch of White kids, they don't ever ask questions. Sometimes I feel like the White kids, they are afraid to ask questions. Well not afraid, but they don't want to ask questions, so they don't seem like they don't know what they talking about in front of the

Black kids. Cuz, I know that sometimes I have questions and some of the White kids are like, “I was confused about that too.” I know sometimes they don’t want to raise their hands, so they don’t look a certain way.

Researcher: Do your teachers encourage you to ask questions?

Angela: Yeah, they encourage questions.

Researcher: Then, why do you feel embarrassed to ask questions?

Angela: Because I don’t want to be the only one that’s asking for help. Cuz it’ll make me feel like slow. Haha. Like I don’t know what I’m talking about. It makes me feel stupid.

Researcher: So, it’s kind of like, there’s an expectation that no one should ask those questions in these classes?

Angela: It’s in all these classes plus maybe it’s because I don’t like when the attention is on me. I don’t like being the only one talking.

Researcher: Have you tried going to the teacher after class?

Angela: I can do that. Yeah, I do that but in the middle of class I would not do that. I usually try to write down my question or think about my question until they get done with lecture so then I can ask on my own.

Researcher: How often do you go to your teachers after class if you are struggling?

Angela: Most of my other classes, I don’t really struggle in. But it’s like my AP chem class, sometimes I do struggle in it. Not that’s it’s like hard but sometimes it’s a lot. It’s challenging. That’s pretty much the only class.

Being enrolled in a majority White course and seeing that none of her peers ask questions creates an expectation that if you are a student of color in an AP class, you do not ask questions. More importantly, for Angela, who is one of the few students of color in her AP class, openly

asking questions in front of her peers or asking for help makes her feel like she would be viewed as “slow” or “stupid.” Angela preferred to go up to the teacher after class or at another time so that her peers do not question her intelligence and her enrollment in the AP course as a Black student.

Angela and Tatiana’s concerns with being viewed as “stupid” in their AP course are not just personal concerns but concerns that have been shaped by real interactions with their peers that ultimately shape how students of color view themselves and their own intelligence within these courses. For example, in her AP English and math course, Kiki’s White peers openly shamed and questioned her intelligence when she asked questions in these courses. In the following passage, Kiki describes her experience with her peers in her English and math course.

Researcher: Did you participate in class discussions?

Kiki: I didn’t really talk at all. I just listened to what they had to say.

Researcher: Why? Are you shy?

Kiki: Yeah, because last time I asked a question. Last time I asked a question about math, people called me stupid for asking that. Like one person called me stupid. I asked a question about, I don’t even know, and then this girl behind me called me stupid. Ever since then, I was kind of like, I’ve been shy asking questions and stuff. In my AP classes, I always feel like I’m not good enough as those kids. Because I don’t know. They always know more, they think more. I don’t really ask questions either so that may be part of it too. But my math and stuff, like ever since I started listening in class, I have been getting better. I’ve been getting A’s on my tests and everything like that.

Researcher: Do you ask questions about study guides?

Kiki: In math, when no one is paying attention, I do but in the other classes, I know they are paying attention, so I just don't ask questions. That's why, like, I always feel like I'm dumb and stuff because people are always smarter than me and get better scores than me and I know I shouldn't be comparing myself to other people but yeah. My grades are good, but my GPA is like, nah, it's a 4.5.

Researcher: Your GPA is a 4.5? How is that bad?

Kiki: Because it's supposed to be at a 5.0.

Researcher: You have a 4.5. That's not bad.

Kiki: They rank you. The school, Willow Glen. I hate it because they rank you. Yeah, like one person was like, "I'm first out of 300 freshmen" and they think I'm dumb.

Researcher: Well, do you know why they're scoring higher?

Kiki: I think because their classes are weighted. More of their classes are weighted.

They're taking APEX. Apex is like a computer class and that's heavily weighted. This girl, she has a 5.7 GPA, and she does not do any swimming. She's only in orchestra that's it but she doesn't do any after-school stuff or anything. She's always making us feel dumb. She thinks I'm dumb and stuff. She's not nice. She literally, she would literally say, "Let me see all your tests then, if you're doing good in math." I'm like, okay. So, I showed her all the A's that I got and was like, "See, I'm doing good in math so shut up about whatever." Her parents are White and like rich. They probably get 500,000 a year or something.

Like any other student who is confused or needs clarification, Kiki thought that openly seeking help from her teacher would be beneficial, but after listening to her peers' comments, it changed her approach for seeking help within the AP courses. She quickly learned that asking

questions would lead to her being viewed as “stupid” and openly ridiculed by her White peers. In order to prove her intelligence and that she belonged in the AP course, Kiki had to show her grades to one of her peers, who often bragged about her intelligence. While Kiki has defended herself in some of these situations and has good grades, these sorts of comments and interactions have caused Kiki to feel as though she is not as smart as her peers. While Kiki is not a non-English native speaker, has immigrant parents, as is not as wealthy as some of her White middle-class peers, she holds herself to higher standards to make sure she is seen as intelligent and worthy of being in these courses.

Kiki was not the only student within the AP course, whose intelligence would be questioned. When discussing whether Liliana ever noticed any racial and class tensions within her AP classes, she shared her experience of when she was accepted into an ivy league school and how her White peers in her AP class reacted to the news.

Liliana: Well, I definitely did, like in terms of college admissions, there was some tensions because when I got into this university, and my White friend didn't, there was something unsaid, often some things said too about why that was, which often went down to because you are a student of color and stuff like that.

Researcher: Because of affirmative action?

Liliana: I don't remember how they would put it, but you can tell that's what they were thinking which is like no! Maybe it's because I'm like president of the Key club, president of Habitat, I did sports, I got all A's, you know, but that's what people jump to. I get it, people are hurt when they don't get into a college and when they see someone else get into college, a certain college, they're like “this is unfair,” you know. But yeah, there was definitely that tension within.

Similar to Kiki, Liliana was one of the strongest performing students of color in her AP classes and was involved in various after-school clubs and yet, her AP White peers questioned her intelligence when they heard of her acceptance into ivy league schools that denied them admissions. Her White peers overlooked her hard work and intelligence and instead attributed her success to her race and affirmative action policies. This event caused tensions within her class and affected her friendships with some of her peers, peers she had been in school with since elementary school and had worked closely with in her AP courses and after-school clubs. They knew she was a top performing student but for students of color, their talents, skills, and involvement in various activities is often ignored because of the racist assumptions that continue to be attached to their race and intelligence.

Conclusion

This chapter provided a critical description of the results from the eight semi-structured interviews with both students and parents of color. The data was presented in four themes focusing on answering the first and second research questions: 1) What institutional factors (e.g. guidance counselors, teachers, tests, peers, etc.) are influencing students' academic decisions and outcomes? 2) How does the intersection of race and class influence students' academic choices, opportunities, and perceptions of themselves and their peers? In examining students' counter stories, the following themes emerged: 1) Tracked Choices: Enrolling in advanced placement courses as students of color, 2) Lack of Diversity in AP courses: "It's always the same students," 3) Racism within the AP courses: "Dang, I go to school with a lot of racist White kids," 4) Academic Success: "Whiteness equals intelligence" all of which align with CRT tenets (colorblindness, interest convergence, whiteness as property, racism is endemic), and help explain how their academic choices continue to be influenced by racism within Willow Glen

High School. More specifically, while the school claims that all students have the opportunity to enroll in AP courses through freedom of choice practices, school administrators and teachers play a key role in determining who is allowed access into these courses, who will stay enrolled in these courses, and who will succeed. As Table 4.1 shows, the majority of the students that enroll in AP courses are mainly White, middle-income, and middle-class students. In addition, the racism, lack of support from AP teachers and peers, and students' own class standing determined their academic outcomes and enrollment in these courses. For students of color who were born into middle-income and middle-class families and had access to support from their parents and/or outside support like tutoring services, they were more likely to stay enrolled in their AP courses and successfully pass them. Students who were born and raised in low-income and lower-class families or transitioning into middle-income and middle class, were more likely to withdraw from an AP course and drop down to the general track. Moreover, all students in this study were unable to fully benefit from the college preparatory courses due to lack of access or because of racial tensions that affected their experiences and learning within these courses. These issues illustrate that the freedom of choice in course selection does not aid course detracking but instead serves as a colorblind practice that furthers tracking and segregation within this school and ultimately protects the rights of Whites to these college preparatory courses while leaving students of color behind.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

While high school students work towards college or to enter the workforce, some schools continue to unequally prepare them for higher education or the workforce. Amongst the various factors, academic tracking continues to strongly influence the educational outcomes of students of color. Since its adoption in the early 20th century, the effects of tracking have gained criticism for its negative impact on access and equity for low-income and students of color (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Oakes, 1985; 2005; Rubin, 2003, 2006; Rubin & Noguera, 2004; Noguera and Wing, 2006; Ochoa, 2013; Wheelock, 1992; Wong, 2018; Yonezawa, 2000; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006). Tracking denies low-income and students of color the opportunity to learn higher level curriculum and normalizes the racial stereotypes and segregation of students by race and class. More importantly, schools who claim to have detracked their courses continue to track students through colorblind and covert methods such as choice practices. Choice practices normalizes tracking by ignoring both institutional and social factors that influence the academic choice and outcomes of students of color (Chapman, 2013; Welner & Oakes, 1996; Yonezawa, 2000; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006; Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002).

The purpose of this research was to examine the process and outcomes of choice practices on academic tracking for students of color. More specifically, I was interested in examining the institutional and social factors that influence student choice in course enrollment for students of color and whether these factors aid detracking mechanisms or uphold academic tracking practices at Willow Glen High School from a Critical Race Theory perspective (CRT). Through a qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews with eight students and parents of color, I examined the following questions through a CRT perspective that engages five

prominent tenets (counter-storytelling, the permanence of racism, whiteness as property, interest convergence, and the critique of liberalism):

- 1) What institutional factors (e.g. guidance counselors, teachers, tests, peers, etc.) are influencing students' academic decisions and outcomes?
- 2) How does the intersection of race and class influence students' academic choices, opportunities, and perceptions of themselves and their peers?

From the data, four major themes emerged that both align with the CRT tenets and represent students' academic experiences with tracking and ability grouping: 1) Tracked Choices: Enrolling in advanced placement courses as students of color, 2) Lack of Diversity in AP courses: "It's always the same students," 3) Racism within the AP courses: "Dang, I go to school with a lot of racist White kids," 4) Academic success: "Whiteness equals intelligence." The participants observations, perceptions, and experiences have been well supported by previous research focusing on tracking and ability grouping as well as CRT authors challenging the use of colorblind practices (Alexandre & McDill, 1976; Ansalone, 2000; Bell 2005, 1993; Chapman, 2013; Carbado, 2011; Crenshaw, 2011; DeCuir and Dixson, 2004; Gamoran, 1987; Goodlad, 1984; Harris, 1993; Hoffer, 1992; Houtte & Demanet, 2012; Ladson Billings and Tate 2006; Lleras and Rangel, 2009; Martinez, 2010; Oakes, 1985; Pallas, Entwisle, Alexander, & Stluka, 1994; Vanfossen et al., 1987).

Summary of Findings

Tracked choices: Enrolling in advanced placement courses as students of color. The first theme discussed the direct ways in which students' choices in course enrollment were directly controlled by Willow Glen High School staff and administrators. Despite stated policies of supposed freedom of choice in course selection, students at WGH encountered several types of

institutional barriers when attempting to enroll in the AP courses. As described by participants, as early as middle school, educators and academic administrators determined who would gain access to the AP courses, and responded selectively to students' and parents' requests for higher placement. For example, during 8th grade, Rosa, who was performing well in the regular math course, wanted to move into the AP prep algebra 1 course but was denied due to it "being too late" to make any changes to her schedule. She would have to remain in a course in which she already knew the material and would not learn anything new. What she later learned was that other students in similar situations would be granted access to the advanced courses when their parents advocated on their behalf and went directly to the principal. Manuel's son, Aaron, who is a native Spanish speaker, was prevented from moving up into a higher-level Spanish course by his teacher who could not recognize that his course performance was due to boredom from a high achieving student. Instead, the teacher used his score from a surprise test to deny him the opportunity to move up and into a course that could later provide him access to the AP Spanish course. Carla, Kiki's friend, had enrolled and successfully passed the AP prep algebra 1 course in middle school, and without any explanation, was denied access to the freshman AP prep geometry math course at WGH. She and her parents would have to demand a meeting with the high school principal, who would later allow Carla to enroll in the next sequence of AP prep math courses. While in this study, the students that were directly denied access to AP courses were primarily Latinos, these issues were known to affect other students of color at WGH in direct and indirect ways. During Carmen's interview, she discussed how parents of color were often the ones trying to push for change in access and assignment to these courses. However, from the previous experiences that Manuel had with school administrators, he did not believe

that administrators nor the teachers at WGH had his son's best interest and took matters into his own hands.

As seen in other studies including those that have looked at school choice practices, the freedom to choose has largely been associated with students race and class standing (Austin & Berends, 2018; Bell, 2004; DeArmond, Jochim, & Lake, 2014; Holme, 2002; Jabbar & Lenhoff, 2020; Lareau & Goyette, 2014; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Oakes, 2005; Oakes et al., 1997; Ochoa, 2013; Orfield 2013; Richards, 2014; Robinson, 2000; Rossell, 1995; Siegel-Hawley, 2013; Tach and Farkas, 2006; Wells & Serna, 1996; Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna 2002. From these studies, it was found that in schools with a large population of low-income and students of color, high-income and White students were given leniency when requesting access to the advanced level courses. In contrast, students of color were met with hidden pre-requisites, lack of information for advanced courses, and resistance from school administrators. Similar to these studies, the experiences of Rosa, Carla, and Aaron show how schools continue to directly influence the academic decision of students of color in detracked schools such as WGH. More specifically, these findings shows that colorblind practices such as freedom of choice in course enrollment not only uphold tracking but protects the academic interests of White and middle-class students.

Lack of diversity in AP courses: "It's always the same students." The second theme focused on the topic of lack of diversity within the AP classes. More specifically, all student participants noticed that the same type of students were always in the advanced courses. These students were majority White, middle income, and middle class, with parents who were professors or university administrators. When compared to the general courses, where students of color were the majority, when enrolled in AP courses, all participants noticed they were one of less than 8 students of color in their courses. Aside from the lack of racial diversity within the

AP courses, students' income, social class, and status were other factor that clearly stood out. Through casual class conversations and the brand name items that students wore and owned, participants could easily determine that most of their peers were from a middle-income and middle-class families and that their parents were associated to working for a university. While student participants noticed this pattern within all their AP courses, they also noticed the influence this had on student enrollment and success in these courses.

In her interview, Liliana mentioned that middle-income and middle-class students with parents associated with a higher education institution were the ones who enrolled in the AP courses. It was uncommon for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and who did not have a parent work in higher education, enroll and stay enrolled in the AP courses. This not only proved to be a strong factor behind the enrollment rates for the AP courses, but it also influenced the division of students into two tracks within WGH. In the AP courses, the majority of students were the children of university professionals, middle-income and class, and mainly White, whereas in the general courses, you would mainly find students of color who were low-income and from working class families. This racial and class separation was one that also carried over into the extracurricular programs such as band, sports, stem clubs. The segregation of students was concerning because it limited the social interactions between students from different racial and class backgrounds, but it also normalized this separation between students; making the school seem like there were two separate schools within one. Discussed in the next theme, the lack of student interaction would go on to shape the classroom experiences for students of color in the AP courses.

According to other studies, one of the most consistent impacts of tracking and ability grouping has been the separation of students by race, ethnicity, income and social class

(Alexandre & McDill, 1976; Chapman, 2013; Oakes, 1985; Vanfossen et al., 1987). More specifically, when students are separated into academic groups, the outcomes of tracking will illustrate a strong correlation between tracking or ability grouping and ethnicity and SES (Alexandre & McDill, 1976; Oakes, 1985; Vanfossen et al., 1987). When comparing students in high ability or college tracks to vocational or low ability groups, researchers find that certain tracks or ability groups are made up of mainly the same type of students with similar race, ethnicity and SES (Alexandre & McDill, 1976; Oakes, 1985; Vanfossen et al., 1987). As discussed in the next theme, the racial and class segregation of students at WGH has detrimental outcomes for students of color in AP courses.

Racism within the AP courses: “Dang, I go to school with a lot of racist White kids.

The third theme that emerged and that was related to the permanence of racism was the racism that students of color experienced within their AP courses. It was in these courses, where students learned about the impacts of racial segregation within their school. For students like Rosa, Nicki, and Tatiana, lack of diversity within their AP courses influenced their engagement with their peers, teachers, the classroom material, as well as their decision to stay enrolled in these courses. When topics of race and racism were discussed in the AP courses, teachers were often less aware of how class material and the ways it was being taught could be interpreted as racist and hurtful for Black and Latino students. For example, in Rosa’s AP course, where she was one of the two Latina students, her White teacher and student teacher taught about Mexican immigration and its ties to the cartel. As an assignment, students were asked to write a letter pretending to be part of a cartel/gang or as the teacher put it “as part of the culture,” and then engage in a class debate on whether they support the building of the wall along the border. The material not only created a single-story depicting Mexicans as violent but left out the many

factors influencing the immigration of this group to the U.S. The depiction of Mexicans as drug dealers, and her peers joking about what to discuss in their threat letters, as well as having to engage in a debate on whether to build a border wall left Rosa feeling frustrated, invisible, and alone. Even after her mother reached out to the teacher about the racist undertone of the topic and assignments, the teachers showed no understanding about how this material and the assignments could be interpreted as demeaning and racist. Instead of apologizing to Rosa and the class, her teacher simply excused Rosa from completing the threatening letter and continued to allow the student teacher to return to her class and teach on similar material. Her teacher's race and lack of cultural understanding negatively impacted her role as a teacher and the learning of students of color such as Rosa. This experience not only affected her self-esteem but her future participation in the course.

Similarly, Nicki and Tatiana would experience a similar event in their AP English course, where their White teacher and White peers would act out a scene from a book on African Americans. In their skit, they pretended to be African Americans slaves in cages and chains and openly laughed while acting this out. The lack of seriousness and awareness by her peers and teacher was hurtful to Nicki, who mentioned that the act had nothing to do with the class discussion. Similar to Rosa, Nicki felt like her White peers and teacher could not fully understand the extent of the situation because they did not have a personal connection to slavery nor to the experiences of African Americans in the U.S. While the teacher and her peers apologized, Nicki and some of her other Black peers from the course had to involve the high school dean in a discussion on how this event was inappropriate and disrespectful to Black students in the AP course. These sorts of issues would continue with other discussions about race and racism, which often led to arguments between White and students of color and with little to

no intervention from the AP teachers. In contrast, in the non-AP courses, Nicki and Tatianna described how their teachers would take a direct stance against racist or ignorant comments made by their peers and support students of color in class discussions involving race and racism. In addition, Tatiana discussed how her discomfort with speaking up against the racist comments in the AP courses was associated to feeling like her voice did not matter and like she did not have a support group in these classes. As a result, she and Nicki eventually left their AP English course and dropped down to the non-AP section, where they would surround themselves with supportive teachers and peers.

In both AP courses, teachers intended to bring awareness to issues regarding immigration, slavery, and in general issues of race and racism, but the lack of historical knowledge regarding the oppression of people of color and how to effectively engage students on these topics, did not allow students to learn and engage in meaningful and well-informed dialogues with their peers. Instead, teachers' poor cultural awareness and teaching practices led to the othering students like Rosa, Nicki, and Tatiana. When teachers do not have training and experience working with a diverse student population, like what we see in some of the AP courses, their teaching practices and awareness is limited to the views and experiences of a White middle-class group, leaving little room for growth for both White students and the teacher in AP courses. Inadvertently, these practices end up upholding White supremacist views and practices within the education setting that work to other students of color (DeCuir and Dixson, 2004).

In similar studies (Diamond et al., 2007; Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002) comparable results pertaining to issues of racial isolation and experience with racism in the upper-level courses were seen for students of color. Through interviews with students, Diamond et al. (2007) found that Black students reported that in their regular classes, there was a stronger support

system and one in which they ended up moving into after facing negative racial experiences within the upper-level courses. In addition, Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna (2002) also found similar results, where students of color were often hesitant to enroll in upper-level courses or stay enrolled in these courses because their experiences with AP level teachers and peers taught them that their voices were not respected. Students of color reported struggling with the ways in which their advanced teachers taught course material and with the negative student interactions that existed within these courses. When their White peers could not relate to and did not show any interest in wanting to understand their experiences, it heightened racial tensions within these courses. For Nicki, it was a constant battle of having to always speak up and defend herself and the experiences of Blacks, while Rosa and Tatiana tried to survive in this setting by minimizing their presence and remaining quiet during class debates. As a result, Nicki and Tatiana, who felt rejected and disrespected by their AP teachers and peers, returned to the relative safety of the general classes, where they found support from both teachers and peers.

Academic success: “Whiteness equals intelligence.” The fourth theme that emerged in this study focused on the factors that determined the academic success of students of color enrolled in the AP courses. More specifically, after students gained access to advanced courses, their experiences within their AP courses taught them that their success in these courses were not always supported and was mainly their own responsibility. The support/lack of support students received from their teachers, peers, their socioeconomic standing, and the overall AP environment ultimately determined their success and enrollment outcomes.

For most students of color, but more specifically, for low-income students and those transitioning from low-income backgrounds to middle-income and class, obtaining access to a supportive teacher had a major impact on their learning and whether they continued to stay

enrolled in the AP courses. This was evident in the case of Angela, who with the support of her AP chemistry teacher she was able to stay enrolled and pass the course with a B. However, in her AP prep math course, the unavailability of her new teacher and lack of awareness of his teaching pace, as well as not finding the after-school tutoring to be helpful, led Angela to drop down to a regular math course. Similarly, Rosa, was also struggling in her AP prep math course and did not find her teacher, after-school tutoring, and her counselors' advice to be helpful. She did not want to drop down to a regular course and instead relied on her mother and stepfather for out of school support. With the help of her mother, Rosa was able to obtain support but from a private tutor. While Rosa, was low-income, her mother knew how to hire a college student as a tutor and help Rosa pass her AP math course. More importantly, she knew the importance of Rosa performing well in math and science courses for a pre-vet education. Unlike other low-income students and students like Nicki and Angela, who until high school had become middle-income and middle class, Rosa's mother's knowledge and connections to academic resources, made her experience as a low-income student different from students in this group and more similar to those from a middle-class background such as Liliana, Kiki, and Aaron.

In the case of Liliana, Kiki, and Aaron, who were raised in class income and class-class families, their success in the AP courses were not dependent on the support from their teachers and the schools. They all came from middle-income and class-class families that provided them with the support at home or through social networks. They could all afford tutors but because someone in their family or social networks were college educated and could help them with homework, they did not need to depend on the teachers or school tutors.

Despite the creation of the Minority Enrichment Program for underserved populations in AP courses, when students like Angela, Nicki, and Tatiana could not get access to support and

could not secure their success in the AP courses, they ended up dropping out of their AP courses and enrolling in all general courses. While they obtained the support of their teachers and peers in the general courses, these courses would be too easy and slow at times, not providing them with the rigor needed to better prepare for college. These trends are concerning because these students are not being provided with the same opportunities to enroll in college preparatory courses such as their White and middle-class peers. Instead, low-income students do not enroll or drop down to general courses, where they know they can pass. These factors make the regular classes more appealing, leading some students to self-track into non-college track courses that ultimately under-prepares them for a college education.

Although, all students in this study had discussed their plans to attend college after high school, the lack of challenging coursework and college preparation within some of the non-AP courses has consequences for students after they graduate. From the 2019 graduating class that went on to attend community college, 63% of WGH students ended up in remedial courses (see Table 4.2). In addition, the remedial rates in reading, math, and communication were almost twice as high when compared to other Illinois students. Literature has illustrated that as a result of tracking, low-income and students of color receive differentiated curricula that vary both in the content and method of instruction (Goodlad, 1984; Oakes, 2005). Consequently, these strategies impact the opportunity for students of color to learn and further progress academically and socially by limiting the amount of information and the type of knowledge they receive (Goodlad, 1984; Oakes, 1985).

In addition, the lack of academic skills gained in the non-AP courses could potentially limit college choices for low-income and students of color (Chapman, 2013). Ladson-Billings and Brown (2008) argue that these limited opportunities affect students' futures by making them

less competitive for jobs and thus restricting their exposure to new forms of social and cultural capital. Critical race theorists argue that practices such as these are colorblind yet covertly racist because although race is not supposed to keep students from enrolling in higher track courses, the outcomes clearly show that race is a strong factor in the type of educations students of color receive (DeCuir and Dixson, 2004).

Environment. In addition to the lack of academic support, students of color had reported that the overall AP classroom environment was too competitive and unsupportive. As a result, for some students of color, this affected their perceptions about themselves and their decisions to remain enrolled in the AP courses. For example, students like Tatiana, Angela, Kiki all described not being able to openly ask for help in their AP courses because they were afraid of getting ridiculed by classmates. For Tatiana, her teacher would explain instructions for assignments in confusing terms and seemed distant from her students. When compared to her AP teacher, her non-AP teacher seemed more down to earth and would explain instructions or give feedback in multiple ways until Tatiana and her peers could understand the material and assignments. In addition, it was difficult for her to turn to her AP peers who often bragged about being smart. With these sorts of interactions, she often questioned her intelligence and whether she belonged in the course. She felt like because of her race, others in her course might question her intelligence, something that was usually associated with Whiteness. With the few Black students in her AP classes, a competitive class environment, and the treatment she received from some of her Black middle-income and middle-class peers, Tatiana described often feeling overwhelmed and ended up dropping down to the non-AP English course, where she felt more accepted and could comfortably approach her teacher and peers for support.

Similar to Tatiana, Angela also noticed that her White AP peers, did not openly ask questions in class and felt like this was the unspoken rule. She often associated the act of asking questions to feeling like she would be viewed as slow or stupid by her White peers. Instead, she would write down her questions and approach her teacher after class, where no one would hear or see her asking for help. Tatiana's and Angela's worries about being seen as slow or stupid by peers was not an irrational concern but one that was based on what they and other students' observed in these courses. For example, when Kiki asked her teacher a question in front of her AP class, her White peers humiliated her by calling her stupid. This event led her to hold off from asking anymore questions until the end of class or when no one was paying attention. In these courses, she has also had to prove to her White peers that she deserved to be in those classes by showing her test grades. These negative interactions with her peers led her to doubt her intelligence at times and hold herself to higher standards just to prove to others that she deserved to be in the AP courses. Liliana, on the other hand, felt like her intelligence was questioned when her AP peers learned that she was accepted into an ivy league university. Instead of congratulating her, some of her White peers in her AP classes associated her college admittance to being a student of color and the university upholding affirmative action policies. In addition to Kiki's experience, Liliana's experience is another example of how the intelligence and achievement of students of color are questioned by White peers, who feel entitled to claim the right to be enrolled in the AP courses but even to elite universities.

In Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna's (2002) and Chapman's (2013) studies, students of color reported having to justify their presence in advanced courses by studying more than what was necessary. To prove that Black and Latino students were not seen as "stupid," they felt like they had to know the material in depth and work harder than the White students in their advanced

courses. In addition, some of these students were afraid to approach their peers and teachers for support for fear that it would fuel suspicions that they were incompetent and intellectually inferior. One student in the study mentioned how the stress and pressure to prove himself as an AP student of color, led him to drop down to a non-advanced course (Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002). In other cases, some students of color tried to become invisible by obtaining good grades and not drawing any attention to themselves.

In addition, the entitlement of their White peers shows how the AP courses are seen as White spaces and as what Harris describes as whiteness as property (1993, 1995). These students have to come to expect access into these courses and have set explicit and implicit standards regarding access to the AP courses by openly bragging about their intelligence and calling out students of color that they deem undeserving and unintelligent (Donnor, 2013; Greene, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson Billings & Tate, 2006; Romero; 2013; Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002). In both indirect and direct ways and regardless of intention, White students in AP courses reinforce existing racial inequities through their actions of openly shaming students of color who ask questions in class, questioning their intelligence, demanding proof of their grades, and attributing any academic success to race based practices that they believe favors students of color because of their race and not because of their academic aptitude.

Discussion of Findings

From interviews with students and parents of color, this study illustrates how the practice of freedom of choice in course enrollment at WGH upholds tracking by negatively affecting the educational decisions, aspirations, and outcomes for students of color. The premise behind colorblind practices, like freedom of choice in course enrollment, is assumed to be unbiased and fair, findings from this study illustrate that choice practices at WGH perpetuates racial and class

inequities in access to AP courses for students of color. More importantly, the findings illustrated how students' academic access to enroll in AP courses, decisions to enroll and stay enrolled in AP courses, was largely shaped by racial and class-based factors that are perpetuated within the school.

When adopting a colorblind approach, like freedom of choice in course enrollment, as a solution for historical discrimination by schools, results like the ones seen in this study reveal that it does nothing to address the social and cultural ideologies behind tracking. As a result, it leaves the old views of intelligence and merit intact, which Whites greatly benefit from. As Wells and Serna (1996) found in their study, White parents of high track students, benefitted when educators and school leaders maintained conventional views of intelligence because it favored their children, whose culture and lifestyle is valued in society and is seen as needing protection from those who are not from similar backgrounds and who do not follow dominant values. Thus, freedom of choice serves in the best interest of White middle- and upper-class groups through the form of interest convergence (Bell, 2009). By seeming to voluntarily detrack its courses without a court order, freedom of choice policies and practices at WGH serve to protect the image of being progressive for both Whites and the school while blaming marginalized students and their parents for their racial isolation and disinterest in AP courses. It places the burden of school reform on students of color and their families rather than on the school leaders, educators, students and parents that ignore the role of race, racism and classism within choice policies.

From a CRT perspective, the practice of freedom of choice for course enrollment at WGH is an example of what Crenshaw (1988) describes as restrictive versus expansive notion of equality. According to Crenshaw (1998), the restrictive perspective of equality focuses on the

process that allows access to specific opportunities for marginalized groups. Theoretically, if the process is transparent and equitable, allowing anyone to participate, the barrier of discrimination has been removed (Dixson, 2011). While WGH school leaders see freedom of choice in course enrollment as fair, for Crenshaw, this does not address the persistent inequity resulting from a discriminatory history that has worked to ensure unequal access to opportunity for historically marginalized groups. She argues that the focus of equity has to be on the physical outcomes of policies such as choice, and not on the assumptions behind what some may assume to be unbiased and equitable policies. From student interviews and the school's data on the racial breakdown of students enrolled AP courses (refer to table 4.1), freedom of choice policies, do not threaten the status and interests of middle-class Whites because the current choice practices have not dramatically increased access to these courses for students of color. As seen with Liliana and Kiki, choice in course enrollment only allows a few students of color from middle class backgrounds to enroll and stay enrolled while pushing out those from low-income backgrounds out and down to the general courses. In addition, even when middle-class students are able to gain access to AP courses, they receive an unequal and racist education that further ostracizes them.

This in turn keeps AP courses and other extracurricular spaces as White spaces or as what Harris (1993) refers to as a form of whiteness as property. It keeps White middle-class students from having to interact with and share access to a high-quality education with students of color. Even when seen as unintentional by students of color, both White students and teachers' behavior and actions in AP courses perpetuate the racial and class segregation within the school by creating an unsafe environment for students of color, where their intelligence and presence in these courses are constantly questioned and attacked. As students learn about these spaces and

the lack of support offered in these courses, some decide to revert to the familiarity and safety of the general courses, where they can depend on the support of their teachers and peers.

By only opening up AP courses through freedom of choice practices, covert and overt forms of racism will continue to influence the academic opportunities for students of color though inconsistent access to AP courses, receiving a differentiated education that includes discriminatory and racist material and treatment from teachers and students within the AP courses, and lack of effective resources aimed at helping underserved students of color successfully prepare for AP courses, enroll, and successfully pass these courses.

Implication and Recommendations

In theory, Willow Glen High School “detracked” its courses, but institutional and social factors within the school continue to uphold racial and class inequities that limit access to AP courses for students of color. While the school does not have remedial courses, the school is divided into a two-track system that ends up teaching two types of students: those who are middle class and White and in AP courses and those who are in the general courses and are low-income and majority students of color. While students have the opportunity to choose their classes, student and parent interviews shows that choice practices do not offer students of color the genuine opportunity to be able to choose to enroll and stay enrolled in AP courses. More importantly through this study, choice did not address segregation issues, but it left intact the institutional and social issues that went along with a tracking structure. According to Oakes and other researchers, in order for schools to successfully detrack their courses and increase access to advanced courses for students of color, a response to the school’s social and political climate, not just modifications in policies, is required (Oakes, 1992; Oakes, Wells, Datnow, & Jones, 1997).

One main strategy for addressing the schooling inequities experienced by students of color at WGH includes implementing critical multiculturalism. This framework offers schools the opportunity to target systemic social and cultural inequities through a comprehensive approach that critically interrogates the current policies and practices that further marginalize students of color within their schools. Scholars suggest that teachers and school leaders begin by re-examining the constructions of identity and difference and the ways it influences the education and academic outcomes of marginalized groups (Banks, 1995, 2007; Carter, 2008; Chapman, 2013; Grant and Sleeter, 1989/1997; Lopez, 2003; McLaren, 1994; Nieto, 2000, Nieto and Bode, 2008; Nieto, Bode, Kang, & Raible, 2008). This involves confronting the ideology of cultural deficiency and how it shapes the views of intelligence, merit, and success from an intersectional perspective. Rather than turn a blind eye to the academic realities of students of color at WGH, administrators, teachers, and staff can work to understand how racism and classism is embedded in the current hierarchical education system that disproportionately places and pushes low-income and students of color into regular courses and White middle-class students into college preparatory courses.

Furthermore, in examining multicultural educational theories and methods of teaching and learning, schools can create environments for students that foster respect and intercultural understanding (Banks, 1995, 2007; Carter, 2008; Chapman, 2013; Grant and Sleeter, 1989/1997; Lopez, 2003; McLaren, 1994; Nieto, 2000; Nieto and Bode, 2008; Nieto, Bode, Kang, & Raible, 2008). More importantly, multicultural education forces teachers and educational leaders to critically examine the curriculum and instructional strategies, as well as the interactions amongst teachers and students to reform current learning environments and programs into those that strengthens students' academic achievement and personal growth.

Therefore, when schools acknowledge and challenge racism within choice policies and practices, will schools become more equitable environments for students of color at WGH. Adopting critical multiculturalism can help address the existing gap between detracking policies and its realization to increasing academic access and success for students of color.

Limitations

While this study was a small case study, there were various limitations. One of the main limitations was the small sample size in which limits the generalization of the results. Results cannot be generalized but can only help explain the experience of these participants in this period of time and in this context. In addition, this study did not involve any class observations due to teachers not allowing any observations within their courses. While this can influence the validity of the students claims and experiences since it relied on memory, I was able to add parents' voices as a way to validate and add to students' experiences. Also, this study did not include interviews of teachers, counselors, or staff and only those of students. Future researchers should include more interviews with students, parents, and administrators/staff. Including teachers, school staff, and leadership will assist in understanding the thought process behind some of the issues/events students and parents are bringing up in their interviews as well as how they make sense of the racial and class disparities between the AP and non-AP courses.

Future Research

Future research is needed to evaluate the effects of freedom of choice in course enrollment as a detracking mechanism and on the academic outcomes of low-income and students of color from a CRT qualitative framework. In addition, to capture a broad set of views, aside from student and parent interviews, future studies should take into consideration the voices of teachers, advisors and administrators. More specifically, interviews with a broad group will

help distinguish the different factors within the school that impact students AP enrollment decisions and outcomes in these courses.

In this study, participants enrolled in AP courses expressed dissatisfaction toward their experiences within these courses due to the colorblind factors within school that perpetuate racial and class inequity. Unlike the AP courses, when students dropped down to non-AP courses, they discussed their satisfaction with teacher support and peer relationships but were dissatisfied with them being too easy and moving too slowly. Some of them had enrolled in AP classes in order to better prepare for college, but their peers and teachers were often unsupportive and created a toxic environment that made enrollment difficult for some. For several of these participants they expressed feeling like they did not belong and were not smart enough to be enrolled in these classes.

Additional research may focus on generating more in-depth understandings of the institutional and social factors within the school that influence the AP enrollment decisions and experiences in these courses for students of color. Research may also look for ways to better accommodate students of color interested in enrolling in AP courses, and when enrolled in these courses, ensuring that programs meant to support them are in full effect and providing them with the needed support and resources for success.

Conclusion

Through the counter-stories of students and parents of color experiencing choice as a detracking mechanism, this study illustrates that reducing tracking must involve more than theoretically giving students the choice to enroll in AP courses. Colorblind policies like freedom of choice in course enrollment inadequately address issues of access because they ignore the institutional and social mechanisms within schools that privilege White and middle- and upper-

class groups. More specifically, administrators and teachers implement choice policies and practices through deficit paradigms of racial groups that uphold White supremacy by providing students of color with inconsistent access to AP courses, a differentiated education that includes racist curriculum, comments, and treatment from teachers and students within the AP courses, as well as lack of effective resources that prepare students of color for enrollment and completion of AP courses. If schools are devoted to detracking their courses, school leaders and educators must question the racial hierarchies perpetuated by choice and how it preserves racially segregated spaces within schools; spaces that carry within them meanings of intelligence, merit, and success that affect students' academic decisions and perceptions of themselves (Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002).

Critical multicultural education can be a solution for addressing inequities resulting from colorblind detracking policies and practices like freedom of choice in course enrollment. The goal of multicultural education is to help education leaders and teachers challenge normalized dominant notions of race and ability that hinder access to a high-quality education for historically marginalized students. To begin eradicating the patterns of racism and inequity in course enrollment, race conscious policies and practices need to be implemented in schools. This involves school leaders and teachers looking beyond the policies they are implementing and look at social and cultural ideologies within curriculum, teacher training, teaching practices, and student and teacher interactions. This will work to strengthen students' academic achievement, personal growth, and fosters respect for cultural difference (Banks, 1995, 2007; Carter, 2008; Chapman, 2013; Grant and Sleeter, 1989/1997; Lopez, 2003; McLaren, 1994; Nieto, 2000; Nieto and Bode, 2008; Nieto, Bode, Kang, & Raible, 2008).

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