The Duplicity of Equality: An Analysis of Academic Placement in a Racially Diverse School and a Black Community

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Background/Context: For more than four decades, researchers have shown that African American students are overrepresented in lower-track classes, while their White peers tend to be in advanced courses. In the past twenty years, school districts have implemented detracking reforms that stressed self-selection policies as an alternative to separate academic paths, yet quantitative data still show that most African American students are not attending upper-level or advanced classes in racially diverse schools.

Purpose/Objective/Research Question/Focus of study: This study explores how African American parents come to terms with academic placement, and the mechanisms that impact their child’s educational experiences in a racially diverse school while coming from a segregated high-poverty African-American community.

Setting: Research took place in a racially diverse suburban school and city. The suburban city is a microcosm of the United States, not only because of the racial and economic diversity of its school district, but also because its story encapsulates the plight of many African Americans in relation to the Great Migration, segregation, disinvested neighborhoods, and systemic inequalities.

Population/participants/Subjects: Participants included 26 African American parents, many of whom attended the same school district and experienced their own lower-track placement.

Research Design: Ethnographic methods, which include interviews and observations, were used to explore the research questions. African American parents were individually interviewed about their own educational experiences, children’s academic placement, family background, interactions with the school system, community issues, and perceptions of the middle school and city.

Findings/Results: African American students and their parents were a product of intergenerational tracking. Parents and their children had experienced lower-track courses. In addition, the exposure of African American students and parents to systemic inequalities in their home and community heavily influenced their academic placement and overall educational experiences. Moreover, tracking in this school was not necessarily about abilities and skills but also about separating African American students and creating a formal semblance of equality that actually reinforced systemic inequalities, a reality captured in the phrase “duplicity of equality.”
For more than 45 years, social scientists have shown that African American students in racially diverse schools are more likely to be placed in lower-track classes, while their White peers tend to be in advanced courses (McPartland, 1968; Rosenbaum, 1976; Slavin, 1987). Scholars have demonstrated that tracking—sorting students based on perceived notions of talent and ability—has produced an uneven distribution of knowledge (Oakes, 1985), depriving many African American students of access to the same resources, opportunities, rigorous courses, teaching quality, and academic outcomes as their White peers (Gamoran, 1987; Lucas & Berends, 2002; Page, 1987; Wheelock, 1992). In the 1980s and early 1990s, scholars, activists, and civil rights lawyers collectively brought attention to this stratifying educational practice by arguing that tracking derailed upward mobility, blocked academic success, and maintained separate and unequal educational experiences (Rubin & Noguera, 2004).

As a result, school districts were pressured, and some were forced by court orders, to address these disparate tracks within schools (Welner, 2001; Welner & Oakes, 2000). School districts often relied on detracking reforms that stressed self-selection policies as an alternative to separate academic paths (Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002). In many cases, parents and students were given the “choice” to pick their classes to provide more inclusive educational environments. Although these reforms were implemented more than 20 years ago, quantitative and qualitative data suggest there currently is a resurgence and persistence of tracking (Loveless, 2013). Quantitative data show that most African American students are not attending upper-level or advanced classes (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). In fact, Lucas and Berends (2007) suggested that African Americans are more likely to be in upper-track classes in predominantly Black schools than in racially diverse ones. Qualitative research has contributed to this discussion by illustrating a racial hierarchy in schools that fosters racialized tracking (O’Connor, Mueller, Lewis, Rivas-Drake, & Rosenberg, 2011; Tyson, 2011).

Conventional wisdom often traces racialized tracking to the landmark Brown v. Board of Education (1954) decision which desegregated many schools—but often produced two schools in one. Some scholars have contended that this has led to a “second-generation segregation” in the form of differentiated curricula that results in lower tracks for most African American students, even as they attend racially diverse schools (Mickelson, 2001; Southworth & Mickelson, 2007). This narrative is significant, but to uncover and grapple with current day racialized tracking and address equitable outcomes, one needs a deeper understanding of the bifurcated experiences of racial groups in the United States. This country has a legacy of sorting practices that have preserved and invested in the quality,
property, safety, and life of some Americans, while others encountered different paths fraught with oppression, confinement, resilience, and a struggle for equality.

This struggle for equality is evident in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) Supreme Court decision, in which the Supreme Court rejected the argument of Homer A. Plessy, a mixed-race man, that separate accommodations were unequal and violated the Fourteenth Amendment. In a seven-to-one decision, the Court rejected Plessy and implemented a “separate but equal” doctrine. Understanding of this doctrine is vital in helping social scientists grapple with systemic inequalities in our era, because it illustrates a *duplicity of equality*: an affirmation of justice for all, concurrent with practices that far too often sort and confine African Americans into environments that enforce an unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and knowledge. The duplicity of equality exemplified in the *Plessy* case forges separate and unequal life outcomes, despite rhetoric and legislation that declare equality and justice for all.

Although *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) and subsequent cases (*Brown II*) dismantled legal segregation, other current-day mechanisms have caused separate and unequal life trajectories, outcomes, and struggles in African American homes, schools, and communities. Researchers are highlighting a new Jim Crow (Alexander, 2011) that causes mass incarceration and school-to-prison pipelines (Dancy, 2014; Fowler, 2011); disparities in access to quality educational opportunities and resources (U.S. Department of Education, 2014); culturally insensitive teaching and racial discrimination in schools (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; A. Lewis, 2003; A. Lewis & Diamond, 2015); and hyper-segregated schools and neighborhoods where systemic inequalities produce traumatic social conditions that African Americans experience daily (Florida & Mellander, 2015; Lofton & Davis, 2015; Reardon, Fox, & Townsend, 2015). Therefore, to more fully understand the mechanisms that underlie the academic tracking of African American students, I attempt to identify a legacy of sorting that has resulted in inherently unequal places, outcomes, and experiences, while Americans simultaneously evoke the rhetoric of equality. This duplicity of equality evokes the legacy of the Plessy decision, even though we are living in the land of the *Brown* decision. In essence, the ghost of Plessy haunts our nation and continues to impact African Americans’ homes, schools, and communities profoundly.

This paper investigates this duplicity of equality by examining the experiences of African American parents in a racially diverse middle school and a segregated high-poverty community. This research focused on the voices and experiences of 26 African American parents/guardians whose children confronted racialized tracking and neighborhood inequalities. It
uses ethnographic methods within the nexus of home, school, and community to gain detailed information on (1) how African American parents come to terms with and experience academic placement in a racially diverse school and Black community, and (2) what current-day mechanisms in their home and community have an impact on their academic placement and perceptions of where they belong in their school.

FORMATION AND PERSISTENCE OF THE DOPPLICITY OF EQUALITY IDEOLOGIES THAT GENERATED CAPITAL

In the late 1990s, scholars of detracking began to acknowledge some White parents’ deeply held ideologies and deployment of various forms of capital to maintain racialized tracks in detracked schools (Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997; Welner, 2001; Welner & Oakes, 1996). These researchers noted that some parents, teachers, and administrators had deeply held views associating racial minorities with lower intelligence (Watanabe, 2006). They also pointed to the social and cultural capital of certain White parents who used their privileges to perpetuate tracking (Wells & Serna, 1996). It is helpful for researchers of tracking to acknowledge the impact of a legacy of sorting that has blocked African Americans’ access to economic, social, and cultural capital, while also devaluing their lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and agency.

The duplicity of equality that African Americans face can be traced to the transatlantic slave trade of more than 10.7 million Africans forcibly displaced to the Americas (Gomez, 2006). Despite a Declaration of Independence stating that all men were created equal, most African Americans remained in slavery and were denied the same rights, liberty, and property as Whites. Two arguments were offered to legitimize this subjugation. One was the economic benefit that slavery brought, enabling the United States to provide products to regional, national, and global markets (Beckert & Rockman, 2013; Schermerhorn, 2015). Second, slaves were not considered humans; racial ideologies contended they were mentally inferior, culturally unevolved, and apelike in appearance (Plous & Williams, 1996). Thus, slavery oppressed and dehumanized African Americans, while enabling other Americans to generate capital through this oppression. Although slavery was abolished in 1865, these racial ideologies, unequal distribution of capital, and distinct treatment of African Americans persisted, despite African Americans’ resilient struggle for equality.

The duplicity of equality that allows for unequal places and distribution of resources and opportunities has continued in the United States
through the mechanisms of Jim Crow laws, hyper-segregated neighborhoods, unequal schooling experiences, and mass incarceration for African Americans. These policies and practices have all taken place under the rhetoric of “equality for all.” Therefore, the sorting mechanism that occurs in racially diverse schools is deeply rooted in a larger narrative that has historically allowed, protected, and valued the accumulation of capital for some Americans, while others have been forced to confront racial ideologies, confinement, and exploitation in their pursuit of social and economic capital.

EXPLORING THE BLACK HABITUS

While many African Americans have struggled against systemic inequalities to generate capital, this does not mean that they have not developed their own cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), sense-making, and habits. Since Aristotle’s notion of hexis (in Latin, habitus), social theorists have grappled with how people’s actions become acquired tastes, habits, and desires (Wacquant, 2016). The French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu (1986), who aimed to move away from determinism in relation to people’s actions, described habitus as “structured structures.” These “structured structures” can be conceptual, including the social structures people encounter in their homes, schools, and communities that help them inform their sense-making, forms of agency, and actions. Bourdieu concentrated much of his research on how social class affects people’s actions, desires, and tastes. This suggests the question: How does habitus relate to the duplicity of equality African Americans confront, and which has heavily informed social class in America? As sociologist Alford Young (2004) suggested, when examining the habitus of African Americans, “one must grapple with the formal institutions, in their neighborhoods, and in other settings that together constituted their everyday lives” (p. 45). Therefore, building on the work of Aristotle, Bourdieu, Young, and other scholars, I place habitus within the everyday journey of African American students and parents. The Black Habitus (Lofton & Davis, 2015) acknowledges the systemic inequalities African Americans face and the sense-making, mediating forces, agency, and actions that they perform. It allows for an in-depth understanding of how not only social class, but also race and place, inform sense-making, which is a byproduct of cultural knowledge and performance (Young, 2004).

Researchers of race, place, and social class continue to note that African Americans have not fully benefitted economically from the Civil Rights movement. In fact, since that movement, three out of four African American families living in today’s poorest, most segregated neighborhoods are the
same families that lived in concentrated poverty in the 1970s (Sharkey, 2013). In these neighborhoods, they continue to be exposed to the same systemic inequalities. Further, 63% (Sharkey, 2014, p. 928) of African Americans who moved from areas of high poverty into Black middle-class communities are in adjacent neighborhoods where they still face poorer schools, higher crime, hyper-incarceration, and higher levels of poverty (Alba, Logan, & Bellair, 1994; Massey & Denton, 1993; Pattillo, 2007, 2015; Sharkey, 2014).

Housing inequality is another reality of the Black Habitus. The federal government participated in sorting practices in the 1940s, using redlining and public housing policies to segregate African Americans into high-poverty communities (Atlas & Dreier, 1992; Marcuse, 1995; Massey & Denton, 1993). During the Great Migration (1915–1960), more than 5 million African Americans left the South for the West, Midwest, and Northeast for better opportunities and resources, but quickly discovered upon arrival that they were not in the Promised Land (Lemann, 1991; Wilkerson, 2011). As African Americans flooded into central cities, many White Americans used government-sponsored loans to purchase homes in the suburbs (Seitles, 1996). In addition, the government strategically invested in a highway infrastructure to meet the needs of the new suburbanites (T. Lewis, 2013). By contrast, African Americans were excluded from these government-sponsored home loans and, de facto, from the new suburban schools.

Even today, many Realtors, landlords, and banks perpetuate the sorting process by discriminating against African Americans in regard to housing (Pager & Shepherd, 2008; Ross & Turner, 2005; Rugh & Massey, 2010). Most evictions occur in segregated areas of concentrated poverty (Desmond, 2016; Seedco Policy Center, 2009). As the MacArthur fellow Matthew Desmond (2016) pointed out regarding evictions and the criminal justice system, many poor Black men are locked up, while poor Black women are locked out. Housing for many African American students and their parents was built on unequal grounds and has an undeniable impact on their educational experiences.

Social scientists of the Black Habitus also point out that African American students and parents in these communities face increased crime, health disparities, post-traumatic stress, gang violence, police brutality, unhealthy living conditions, food deserts, and an abundance of liquor stores and payday loans (Harding, 2003; Jensen, 2009; Sharkey, 2013; Wacquant, 2016; Wilson, 1987; Young, 2004). In addition, because of fewer manufacturing jobs, decreased wages, and government disenfranchisement, drug sales and other forms of underground economy have become a significant source of income, while devastating many families in these communities.
Therefore, the research strongly suggests that most African Americans still confront a duplicity of equality that has resulted in systemic inequalities in their homes and communities.

Within these spaces of systemic inequality, African Americans are not static figures but dynamic social actors with cultural, sexual, and political identities. They are not a monolithic group of people, but individuals who deploy different forms of agency, resistance, and cultural expression. Churches, community centers, street corners, and homes are sites where African Americans continue to fight against inequalities as active agents, in contrast to the narrative that suggests they are mentally inferior and culturally deficient (hooks, 1990). African Americans in the Black Habitus show agency and resiliency as they work to liberate themselves from oppression. Most African American students and their parents—because of intergenerational restriction and discrimination from the government and the private sector—are traveling a different path, a fact that researchers, teachers, administrators, and policymakers must understand. This is particularly important when examining the experiences of African American parents whose children experience tracking in racially diverse schools.

TRACKING THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

Public schools in the United States continue the duplicity of equality for African Americans because the majority are not in learning environments that prepare them well for college and upward mobility (United Negro College Fund, 2015). Today, African Americans and Whites have differentiated experiences and outcomes in both racially diverse schools and predominantly Black ones: collectively, these schools far too often fail to provide an environment that gives African Americans access to the skills they need for a changing and global economy (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Public schools have also not been successful at designing curricula (Apple, 1993; Banks, 1999; Gay, 2000) or training teachers (Delpit, 1995; Irvine & Armento, 2001) to meet the educational and developmental needs of African American students (Comer, 2004).

Historians of education have documented this ongoing struggle. J. D. Anderson’s (1988) seminal research described the resilience of African Americans in mobilizing to develop public education in the South as a path to emancipation from White domination. However, these efforts were undermined in that African Americans in segregated schools did not receive the same quality books, materials, and facilities as their White counterparts (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Walker, however (1996, 2009),
encouraged scholars to acknowledge that these segregated schools met the social and emotional needs of African American students because of the enriching environments that had “affective traits, institutional policies and community support [helping] Black children learn in spite of the neglect their schools received from White school boards” (p. 3).

The battle to cultivate learning opportunities for African American students continued into the 1950s. Civil Rights lawyers like Charles Hamilton Houston and Thurgood Marshall argued persuasively that segregation was inherently unequal, resulting in the Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) decision ruling the dual education system unconstitutional. However, long after Brown, the educational needs of many African American students were still not being met. Coleman et al.’s seminal research (1966) showed that family background and school composition have major effects on academic outcomes, arguing that racial integration is needed to provide equal educational outcomes (Crain, 1968; Orfield, 1978). While some have suggested that African American culture is in opposition to middle-class White norms and values, leading African American students to view academic success as “acting White” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1978, 2003), many scholars have fundamentally disagreed that Black or oppositional culture was the culprit. Instead, they contended in the 1990s and early 2000s that there was a cultural mismatch in teacher preparation, curriculum creation, and pedagogical practices (Apple, 1990; Banks, 2004; Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2004; Irvine, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lee, 2004).

Scholars continue to identify structural inequalities in the form of disparities in both funding and access to advanced courses. As Ladson-Billings eloquently stated in her 2006 American Educational Research Association presidential address, “If we are unwilling to desegregate our schools and unwilling to fund them equitably, we find ourselves not only backing away from the promise of the Brown decision but literally refusing even to take Plessy seriously.” Her words argue for equal funding for African American students because, she suggested ironically, the United States has not even taken Plessy’s idea of “separate but equal” seriously. Regardless of the type or location of their schools, many African American students continue to face duplicity in education that articulates equality but offers unequal experiences and access to learning opportunities.

Over the last 45 years, the literature on tracking and detracking has shown these distinct experiences and outcomes in racially diverse schools: most African American students are not receiving the same teaching quality, resources, opportunities, and rigorous courses that lead to upward mobility (Rubin & Noguera, 2004). Therefore, the struggle for equitable outcomes in education continues to be racialized even in ethnically diverse schools (A. Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Tyson, 2011).
literature also shows that the practice of sorting African Americans did not start with academic placement in schools but is connected to a larger struggle for equality in the United States—one that confines by producing and maintaining an uneven distribution of capital, opportunities, and knowledge. Racialized tracking in racially diverse schools maintains this sorting mechanism, placing many African American students in special education and lower-track classes.

This study aimed to explore how African American students and their parents confronted tracking in a middle school and a community that collectively maintained an unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and knowledge.

**CAPTURING THE DUPLICITY OF EQUALITY**

After carefully examining more than four decades’ research on tracking and unequal educational experiences for the majority of African Americans, as well as the historical roots of oppression and present-day inequalities that African Americans confront daily in their homes and communities, I was led to use ethnographic methods (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Willis & Trondman, 2000) to explore the following research questions: How do African American parents make sense of, and come to terms with, academic placement within a racially diverse school and Black community? What mechanisms in their homes and community affect their academic placement?

In the spring of 2009, I was part of a group of researchers from Teachers College, Columbia University, whose observations reaffirmed that in racially diverse districts, most African American students were in lower-track classes and almost all their White peers were in advanced classes. Fascinated by this finding, I wanted to learn how this was happening in a society that prides itself on equality. I picked one school from the study and, from 2010 to 2013, conducted observations in school hallways and lunchrooms, as well as at PTA meetings, parks, beaches, restaurants, town hall meetings, and churches. During this time, I also developed meaningful relationships within the African American community with residents, parents, and pastors, attending several church events and community center functions, and participating in protest with the African American community regarding social injustices they faced. During these observations, I wrote field notes that helped generate questions for the participants and informed the design of this research study. In the beginning of January 2013, I began conducting an intense six-month study of African American students and their parents within a middle school and community.
AREA OF STUDY

This research took place in a northeastern suburban city that is a 50-minute train ride from a global city. The suburban city is a microcosm of the United States, not only because of the racial and economic diversity of its school district but also because its story encapsulates that of many African Americans in relation to the Great Migration, segregation, disinvested neighborhoods, and systemic inequalities. This city was a resort town in the early 1920s and 1930s that later transformed into a residential/beach community.

From the 1930s to the 1960s, many African Americans were recruited from the South to work here in hotels and the homes of wealthy Whites. When African Americans arrived, they were confined to the western central section of the city, while wealthy Whites (mainly Jewish) populated the northeastern area, and middle- to working-class Whites (mainly Italian and Irish) moved to the southeastern corner. A main street divides the West and East areas. Whites were freely able to buy homes along the beaches, and over the years ethnic Whites have intermarried and developed strong political and social networks that have generated capital in their communities. The average home in the city is worth around $500,000, and the median household income is $85,000.

The African American neighborhood has a different story. This segregated area experiences concentrated poverty and is dominated by three public housing apartment complexes. Several blocks are composed of multifamily and single-family homes. There are no Black-owned businesses—restaurants, grocery stores, bookstores, barbershops, beauty shops, or clothing stores. There is only one vibrant community center, owned by the city, and two churches. Unlike the surrounding area, this community has experienced an increase in violence, crime, police brutality, unemployment, evictions, and incarceration rates.

Although African American students and White students live in two different areas and have two distinct experiences, they all attend the same middle school. African Americans make up 14% and Whites about 65% of the school’s population of 900 students. During the last 10 years, the school has had an influx of Latino and Asian American students. On the school’s state report card, which scores students from 1 to 4 (4 is the highest) on standardized testing, most African American students scored reasonably well: 77% had 3s and 4s in English, 78% had 3s and 4s in Math, and 63% did so in Science. In addition, the school has a choice policy that allows parents and students to pick their science and math classes. Yet despite the school choice program and standardized test scores, my observations, interviews with school guidance counselors, and data from the middle school office on student schedules indicated that African American
students were overwhelmingly placed in special education, remedial, or standard classes to such a degree that most advanced math and science classes were all-White.

OBTAINING DATA

In the second week of January 2013, I scheduled individual meetings with the middle school principal, assistant principals, guidance counselors, and school psychologist. The guidance counselors arranged for all the African American students to meet with me for 30 minutes at a time. I held four different sessions with students in which I explained the study, addressed questions, and gave each student a consent form, which also offered parents the option to provide their telephone number and consent to participate in the study themselves.

I interviewed 26 African American parents individually in either the community center, their homes, or a Black church. I asked parents questions about their prior educational experiences, children’s academic placement, family background, PTA meeting attendance, parent conferences, school board meeting attendance, community issues, economic challenges, safety, and perceptions of where they belong in their child’s school and in their city (see Appendix B). Parent interviews were face-to-face and lasted from one hour to three hours. In addition, I had ongoing (usually recorded) conversations with five of the parents to explore some of the issues that other parents or students brought up in their interviews or from my observation notes. I conducted follow-up interviews with some of the interviewees, asking them to clarify or elaborate on some of the issues that they personally addressed in their interviews. In a larger study, I analyzed interviews with both students and their parents, but the present study focuses on the parents’ perspective and how the tracking that parents experienced relates to their own children’s placement.

In addition to in-depth interviews with African American parents during six months of intense data collection, I conducted observations and semi-structured interviews with community leaders (3), pastors (2), guidance counselors (3), White PTA members (5), a school psychologist, teachers (11), a cafeteria worker, two assistant principals, and the middle school principal. Also, I was in constant conversation with community leaders and guidance counselors throughout the study to learn their perspective on the common themes emerging from the interviews with students and parents. One reason for these interviews and discussions was to understand participants’ perceptions of academic placement, the African American community, and school experiences through the technique of member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed (see Table 1).
Table 1. Perceptions of Academic Placement and School Experiences: Interviews, Observations, with Students, Parents, School, and Community January–June 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students/Parents</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>School Administrators</th>
<th>School Personnel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>African American students</td>
<td>38 Community Leaders</td>
<td>3 Assistant principals</td>
<td>2 Guidance counselors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American parents</td>
<td>26 Pastors</td>
<td>2 Principal, middle school</td>
<td>1 School psychologist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Parents</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cafeteria worker</td>
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</tbody>
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69 5 3 17 94

Note. All interviews in this study were digitally recorded and were professionally transcribed.

DATA ANALYSIS

During the three years of observing the African American community and school district, I developed the conceptual framework for this study (see Appendix A). This framework, focused on the roots (causal mechanisms), routes (current experiences), and academic tracks (see Figure 1), laid the groundwork for my six-month ethnographic study, including interviews and observation. While in the field I continued to refine my conceptual framework and develop codes. According to Saldaña, code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a “summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute” in the data (p. 3, 2009). While in the field, I coded many of my notes; this process allowed me to reflect on the codes that were developed while conducting the study as well as the new code words that emerged from reading all transcripts and notes. After combing through the new and old code words, I imported all the code words and transcripts into Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software program, then read the transcripts again and connected the code words to various concepts and sentences (see Appendix A, D).

The coding process involved an extensive search for meaning, and I codified that meaning through multiple readings of documents, interview transcripts, field notes, online articles and comments, and analytic memos (Saldaña, 2009). Overall, I conducted a cycle of coding, which
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started in the field and continued for two years after data collection. This coding involved deep reflection and intense conversations with data as well as with scholars and school practitioners to develop analytic memos (Saldaña, 2009). I reviewed these memos several times and formed clear process patterns. Through this multi-year coding process, I was attentive to three major themes that illuminated how African American parents view their children’s academic placement in a racially diverse school and poor Black community, as well as highlighting some of the mechanisms in their homes and community that are impacting their academic placement and perceptions of where they belong in their school. These themes included historic distinctions and discrimination, the everyday experience of current realities, and the strategies deployed to maintain racialized tracking in the school system. To date, no other published studies on African Americans and tracking have addressed the nexus of home, school, and community by using ethnographic methods to highlight and analyze the voices and experiences of African American students and their parents. A methodology narrative with the identified codes, interview protocol, and sample analyses are included in the Appendices, attached.
Everyone knows that the statute in question had its origin in the purpose, not so much to exclude white persons from railroad cars occupied by blacks, as to exclude colored people from coaches occupied by or assigned to white persons.

- Justice John Marshall Harlan (1896)

In the U.S. Supreme Court, Justice John Marshall Harlan, sole dissenter in the Plessy v. Ferguson decision, contended that separate railroad cars were clearly not intended to exclude Whites from the cars occupied by African Americans, but rather to exclude African Americans from the opportunity to choose their place on trains freely even as the privilege of whiteness was to be able to occupy and be assigned to high-status seats. Although this judgment occurred over 120 years ago, my early interviews with students and parents revealed the distinct struggles they still encountered in the 21st century because they were excluded from the privileges and opportunities their White counterparts enjoyed. This led them to believe their realm of academic choice was different from that of others in the middle school.

The Distinction of Race

African American parents freely discussed the differences they encountered in this racially diverse school district and city. I met three times with Sharon and her husband, Luke, who are two poor parents. In their first interview, they stated:

Sharon: There is a difference between Black and White, and it’s in the school.

Luke: Or the streets, job everywhere.

Sharon: Yeah, when you go to the stores, any place around here there is a difference and my kids see the difference.

Sharon and Luke’s lives were completely different from those of the middle-class White PTA moms whom I also interviewed. Sharon and Luke were constantly seeking work and opportunities in the city. They shared disturbing stories about their experience as students in the school district. Luke noted that when he was in elementary school, his teacher used
a racial slur toward him. His mother went to the school to protect her son from this abuse and ended up having a physical altercation with the teacher who called her son a “nigger.”

Luke was expelled from the school district, and his mother spent time in prison for assaulting a teacher. Several years later, in high school, he returned to the school district but dropped out in his junior year. Sharon, who is a few years older than Luke, also dropped out of high school. Luke later completed his GED in his late 20s and his wife did so in her early 30s.

Twenty-four of 26 parents of Luke and Sharon’s generation were never exposed to advanced classes while they were in school. Twenty parents were in the same school district, which was racially diverse in the 1970, 1980s, and 1990s, but still confronted racialized tracking (Tyson, 2011). Many of their White peers acquired skills for college and career readiness that they passed down from one generation to another, yet the African American parents I interviewed did not acquire these skills and were later unable to help their own children with challenging academic classes. Some scholars refer to this as intergenerational tracking (Lofton & Davis, 2015) because tracking is virtually inherited in some school districts, passed down from one generation to the next because of systemic inequalities that students and parents encounter. Intergenerational tracking has led to racial differences in the production and accumulation of knowledge, and further legitimized an unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and capital in the city (see Figure 1).

Knowing One’s Place

Intergenerational tracking is connected to a larger struggle African Americans encounter that often confines them in distinct and unequal places. Sharon, Luke, and many other parents whom I interviewed claimed that to survive in the school and their community, the unspoken rule was “know your place.”

In the interviews, 88% (23 out of 26) of the African American parents felt their children could not freely play, walk, live, and learn as their White peers did. In their perception, the school district and city had a distinct place for African Americans—and this place was subservient. Kandis, a mother of two high schoolers and one middle schooler, made this point:

It feels like some people are racists and that’s the actual fact. Some people to me is hereditary. Things have been passed down to them and it’s a custom to the way this is supposed to be. A Black person is to stay at this level and we’re at this level.
Kandis was not alone in recognizing a place that made her feel separate and unequal from her White counterparts. Each African American parent I interviewed described a time when they encountered direct forms of racism. I realized upon analysis that these acts of racism made these parents believe they did not belong in certain locations. They felt acts of racism were performed to control them and block their access to opportunities and resources. The African American parents made these insightful comments:

Heather: Well, you’re right up under their feet. You can’t branch out and do anything on your own because everything is controlled. Like they control everything you do.

Mrs. Houston: They’re not going to let you do it; it’s very controlled. That’s just how I see it.

Researcher: So it’s almost like living here is not liberating at all.

Mrs. Houston: No, it ain’t. It’s very controlled.

Not only did African American parents feel controlled in this city, but they also believed their children were being controlled in the middle school. For many parents, this control took a psychological toll, discouraging students from reaching their goals. Stacey clearly made this point:

Because I don’t want nobody in the school breaking my children down. It’s bad enough you got them controlled. You’re not going to break their spirit, too.

Like many other parents, Stacey did not feel the schooling process was educational and liberating for her child. Rather, she felt she had to protect her daughter from the school’s controlling forces. Remembering their own experience with racial slurs and injustice in school, parents feared their children would face racist encounters and discrimination from teachers and administrators whatever their track placement. In fact, a few parents felt that lower-track classes in positive environments could meet their children’s social and emotional needs more effectively than rigorous upper-track classes that were predominantly White with a White teacher.

In addition, several parents mentioned that regardless of academic placement, African American students are mainly encouraged to perform working-class jobs. Steven, a single father, addressed this point:

Instead of encouraging you to become like a doctor or something like that, they encourage you to become like a janitor, a mechanic worker. You know what I’m saying? Stuff like that. They don’t think you could do nothing better than what they label you as.
Most of the parents agreed with Steven’s views because they felt that teachers and administrators could not imagine African American students obtaining skills for upward mobility. The parents suggested that many teachers and city residents only viewed them as capable of performing working-class jobs. Parents constantly pointed to how City Hall hired only Whites and the few “Blacks were sanitation workers.” They also pointed to the nearly all-White teaching staff at the middle school, and the way African Americans were hired only as janitors and cafeteria workers. African American parents in this school district wanted to protect their children from this type of pervasive limitation, regardless of academic placement, that encouraged students to follow working-class trajectories. Yet while some parents sought to protect their children, others tried to fight against the controlling factors that confined them and led to unequal resources. Parents were fully aware there was a price to pay for demanding equality. Janet made this point by citing the example of her brother who was a community leader:

No matter what you think you’re doing, they pretty much control what you do because you can’t really accomplish any goals unless you go hard like John. But then, you also have to go through what he goes through. And I think sometimes they make an example out of him. Letting people know if you do try and get out of hand, this is what will happen to you. He goes through a lot. Sometimes I feel like it’s not worth fighting.

Of Janet’s four children, two dropped out of school, one graduated, and another was attending middle school. She suggested the only way to overcome this control was by resisting the power structures of inequality. Her brother is a community activist who has had painful experiences of retribution. In interviews, he said he was placed in special education classes throughout his entire educational experience. He related several accounts of discrimination and oppression from the “White power structure” and indicated he was suing City Hall because of racial discrimination.

African American parents and community members saw racism carried out through acts of control. This research connected with Omi and Winant’s (2015) discussion of racial formations, in which race is used to maintain power and control. Academic placement for many African American parents was connected to a controlling system within the school which they felt was part of a larger narrative of despair in the African American community, confining them to working-class occupations. Even if they were in upper-track classes, their children would still have to confront this control. For them, schooling was not the great equalizer but rather a site of exclusion from opportunities, prestige, and liberties.
CURRENT REALTIES: THE EVERYDAY JOURNEY

While it has been over 60 years since the landmark Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) decision, African Americans are still haunted by a duplicity of equality. This is particularly evident in the segregated communities and unequal housing that African American students and parents experience daily. About their segregated community, one parent named Tina stated:

I was brought up in [this city], I know my surroundings. I say know because of the “hood part,” how they segregate it in [this city]. They have the Black people in the middle and then the White people on this side and the White people on that side. I don’t like that at all.

A pastor and mentor of students in the community similarly said:

This town is very segregated. I’ve been here since I was nine. I turned fifty-nine this past Sunday so I’ve been here fifty years. I can tell you they are racists, they are segregated, they don’t change. This town’s mindset is all about money. They don’t want people like us here. That’s why these projects are behind City Hall.

Another parent, Maria, reflected:

Most people that come in for the summer don’t even know we have Black people that live here; they think they’re only here to work. It’s extremely segregated.

This city, like most parts of America, is indeed extremely segregated. From the 1940s to the 1970s, African Americans left the South for this city hoping to obtain jobs in luxurious hotels, fancy beach resorts, and wealthy White homes. While many gained employment, they were only able to live in the middle area of the city, away from the beaches, restaurants, bars, stores, and boardwalks. Most African Americans still reside in this area. Three public housing buildings have been built in the African American community. In addition, many homes in this area take Section 8 vouchers.

Community members, pastors, and parents indicated that over the years very few African Americans have obtained good-paying jobs after graduating from high school. In addition, outside of the school, there has been a disinvestment over the years by city council members, school board members, and powerful families who have monopolized and allowed an unequal distribution of resources and opportunities in this
neighborhood (Lofton & Davis, 2015). This city is similar to many parts of the United States with regard to systemic inequalities that disproportionately affect the Black community.

**Housing**

In the African American community, housing is a serious issue that often adversely affects students’ academic performance. Four of the 26 parents I interviewed discussed confronting housing instability through eviction or pressure to move from their Section 8 housing during the academic year. Sharon, who placed her two children in advanced math and science classes, faced housing issues related to her Section 8 voucher. Her two daughters were struggling in these classes, but she believed these classes were necessary to be “successful in life.” At the time of this study, Sharon was not only struggling with her daughters’ academic placement, but with finding a place for her family to live, as she said:

> We got to go to court. There’s so much that we’re going through right now. We’re about to relocate and everything will come back together. It’s difficult when you have to go through so much. I’m not used to going through things like that. With the kids I know, we’re moving in March. Once they get back everything because they’ll be able to sit down at the dining table, sit down in the living room, they will have the space, the Internet and everything.

Sharon recognized the importance of upper-track classes and demanded that her children take these classes in middle school. Many of the teachers and administrators were unaware of her housing struggle and urged Sharon and Luke to place their daughters in lower-track classes because of “behavior problems” and low test scores. Sharon, however, remained committed to upper-track classes to give her daughters skills and knowledge for upward mobility. Her husband later commented on their reality at home:

> We’re in the process of moving. It’s so hectic in the house. We have no wood floor, there’s no downstairs, no refrigerator, no kitchen. We’re in the process of moving this stuff and that’s very burdensome to me.

Sharon and Luke’s situation was extremely complex, but they remained fully cognizant of the benefits of higher-track classes for their children. They were also highly aware that the lack of economic resources prevented their children from having a stable home in which to do homework and access the Internet. Their children were encountering a different struggle
from that of many other students in the advanced classes. They had to not only think about their homework, but also live in conditions that were not conducive to effective study and face the uncertainty of where they would live. These struggles took a toll on their aspirations: when I first spoke to Sharon and Luke, they were determined to keep their daughters in upper-track classes, but a year later, they told me that their daughters were no longer in advanced math and science because guidance counselors and teachers strongly recommended placing them in lower-track classes. Sharon and Luke’s story vividly illustrated how the intersectionality of housing and academic placement for some poor African Americans affects academic performance.

Three other families also faced housing instability. One single parent discussed being in a shelter with her daughter who was struggling in advanced math and science classes. As Jean stated:

I was in the shelter paying one thousand dollars a week to stay in a shelter. They supposed to be helping me out but . . . social services, I paid five and they were paying the other five. We’re paying one thousand a week for me to stay inside a shelter opposed to me staying in a one-bedroom somewhere with my kids.

Jean and her daughter were evicted from their home and therefore lived in a shelter. Their story is consistent with research showing that in predominately working-class and poor Black areas, African American women are heavily impacted by evictions (Desmond, 2016). While Jean understood the importance of academic placement for her child and chose advanced classes, her daughter struggled with homework because she did not know where she could complete it. Housing instability is one distinct struggle that working-class and poor African American students confront through inadequate public housing or evictions.

Circumstances of a Disinvested Community

Another distinct struggle that African American students and parents face is disinvestment in their communities, which has triggered an underground economy centered on drug sales. Two parents/guardians I interviewed were raising children whose parents were addicted to drugs. Four of the 38 students I interviewed were being raised by other family members because of illegal substance use. In addition, the fathers of three students were in prison for drug-related crimes.

Researchers have not found that African Americans use more drugs than Whites (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2012). However, they have found that people who are disconnected from
powerful institutions and lack access to resources and opportunities sell drugs for economic gain. Community members and pastors suggested that many African American males who were in lower-track classes faced chronic unemployment upon graduating or becoming young adults, driving them to participate in an underground economy. They argued that there are very few jobs in the city for African American males because many Whites living in the surrounding areas fill many of the blue-collar jobs. In addition, they cited examples in which the fire department, police department, City Hall, and local stores and restaurants have not hired African Americans from their neighborhood.

As drugs drive the underground economy in this community, African American students in the middle school are profoundly affected by the devastation these illegal substances cause. One grandmother, Ms. Jane, who is raising her grandchildren, described the damage drugs have caused her family:

I done did this. This is over, but look, I done start again. But I love them. Their mother, she still a mess. They are sister and brother. They got the same mother, but they don’t have the same father. But the mother, oh my God. She came here before the hurricane came and I look at her. Now, when she was in jail before and in rehab, when she came home, she looked good. But she done fell back down, and I see her a little bit before the hurricane. Her and her sister both, they're twins. Both of them look terrible.

This grandmother told me that because she wanted the best for her grandchildren, she chose to become their primary guardian. Her twin daughters, who attended the same middle school two decades ago, did not do well in school and began using drugs heavily as young adults. According to Ms. Jane, one “ended up graduating and the other one dropped out.” Both grandchildren are in special education classes. When I asked her about advanced classes for her grandchildren, she felt that because they were born into their mother’s substance abuse problems, their placement was correct. Ms. Jane’s grandchildren are not alone; two other students I interviewed whose parents were addicted to drugs were also in special education classes.

Ms. Jane blamed some men in her community who she believed were drug dealers and “got her girls addicted to drugs,” but she did not limit the blame to the individuals. This grandmother, who left rural Alabama for a job in a hotel, is extremely frustrated today with the way drugs have entered the community she has called home for over 50 years. She stated, “I don’t know. I don’t know, but I can see them [drugs]. I don’t know where they come from. But they done ship down a lot, and we end up in
jail.” Ms. Jane was fully aware that these drugs are not grown in her area, yet many African American homes are devastated by them, and some community members spend considerable time incarcerated.

Drugs have also produced higher rates of violence and crime in this community. As one student stated, “there’s too much violence” in this area. Although incarceration, drugs, crime, and violence are present in many of the surrounding White areas, African American students, parents, community members, and pastors contended that their area was disproportionately affected, which they believed was tied to the interconnected relationship of institutional racism, unemployment, and intergenerational tracking. Columbia University neuroscientist Carl Hart (2013) has suggested that drugs are not the problem—rather, disinvested communities are. His research indicates that if drug users find economic alternatives in poor areas, they are less likely to use drugs. Hart’s research also contended that drugs are a symptom of the same disinvestment in poor Black communities that has caused poverty, unemployment, lack of education, racism, and despair. Aligning with Hart’s research, disinvestment and disenfranchisement of the African American community in this city have clearly triggered the development of an underground economy that contributes to mass incarceration, crime, and violence in the Black neighborhood. In other words, the same students who did not gain access to high-status knowledge that would have prepared them for college and upward mobility while they were in school became adults who could not gain access to community opportunities and resources. Current African American students here are not only impacted by intergenerational tracking but are also heavily burdened with the consequences of a disinvested community.

MAINTAINING RACIALIZED TRACKS

As African Americans’ distinct experiences create disadvantages for them in their homes and communities, the duplicity of equality is also sustained in their racially diverse middle school through the mechanism of tracking. Powerful PTA members were heavily responsible for preserving racial inequalities by socially isolating African American parents and creating an environment at their meetings where they did not feel a sense of belonging. These actions kept African American students and their parents ill-informed about current policies related to academic placement. In addition, African American students internalized a school culture that was founded on fixed notions of intelligence and knowledge instead of fostering resilience, a growth mindset, and a sense of belonging in advanced math and science classes.
The middle school of this city has experienced a bitter detracking battle. The superintendent, many administrators, and the middle school principal all supported detracking policies, while wealthy, influential White parents were opposed to heterogeneous classes. Advocates of detracking in this school district sought to close the achievement gap because they recognized that intergenerational tracking contributed to inequalities in the African American community. By contrast, many White parents saw African American students as having behavioral problems and jeopardizing their own children’s educational experiences. Many White parents joined in solidarity at PTA and school board meetings to block administrative actions. During this battle, the PTA members created a Facebook group consisting mainly of White parents. This group sent emails to parents about academic events, policies, homework assignments, school schedules, and procedures. It became a space where White parents could share information and stories. But this was not an open Facebook page; parents had to be invited to join the group.

Once PTA parents felt they were losing the detracking battle, they called an impromptu meeting through the Facebook group to all parents who were “friends.” Only one African American family was privy to the page and received notification. This family, unlike most other African American families I interviewed, were middle class and lived in a predominantly White area in the city. The mother was biracial (Jewish and African American) and was extremely savvy about race relations in the city; she informed an African American community leader/parent about the impromptu school board meeting that administrators had to attend. Brian, an African American father, related the story:

Brian: I don’t know if you remember, last year I told you we had this board meeting which was quote unquote this was supposed to be a secret board meeting that the African Americans and Hispanics weren’t supposed to know about, it was just going to be all Whites.

Researcher: Who was supposed to attend?

Brian: The board, the school board and certain prestige residents of [the city] wanted to meet with the board.

Brian noted that many community members and pastors felt this was a secret meeting designed to block the progress of detracking reforms. Once Brian learned about the meeting, he tried to spread the word to members of the African American community. However, with such short notice, very few could attend. When I discussed this meeting with some of the African American parents, many felt the PTA members did not want
them to attend and hoped to maintain unequal educational experiences in the school by keeping tracking policies.

The powerful parents continued in a bitter fight with the school district for three years, leading to a compromise in which the sixth grade was detracked and seventh- and eighth-grade math and science classes were to be self-selected. Advocates of detracking provided inclusive classrooms in the sixth grade, but PTA members were able to maintain advanced courses for some students. After implementation of the policy, the superintendent and middle school principal resigned. Many African American parents and community members suspected they were pushed out of their positions because of their dedication to detracking and meaningful integration.

The detracking battle left unresolved issues among African American community members, which made them feel even more unwelcome at PTA and school board meetings. While observing some school board and PTA meetings, I saw only one African American parent. I began asking African Americans why they did not attend. Many said they were “working long hours,” “having two jobs,” not “having a babysitter,” and were “too busy.” However, also implicit was the additional burden they felt was involved in attending. African American parents suggested that racial tension and feelings of not belonging prevented them from attending these meetings and gaining insight in how to navigate their children’s educational experiences. These parents expressed these views:

Researcher: Do you ever attend the PTA meetings?
Parent: No. Full of shit.

Researcher: Tell me why. Why do you feel that way?
Parent: They’re racist. If I walk into the door, it’s just so uncomfortable.

Another parent, Monica, stated:

I would like to attend, but to me it’s like when you go to some of the parent-teacher conferences and stuff like that . . . I don’t know, you can see that they do look down on you. To me, I think they feel like they’re much better than me.

Yet another parent said:

Researcher: Do you attend PTA meetings?
Parent: Until they get on my nerves. Sometimes they make it seems like African American children are the only ones that are not holding the weight.
Of 26 African parents, only two said they felt comfortable and safe in PTA and school board meetings. African American parents felt that not only did White parents want to maintain all-White PTA membership, but they also wanted to construct a mechanism to prevent African American parents from gaining information and resources to improve their children’s educational experiences.

African American parents offered several examples of their discomfort and sense of exclusion at PTA meetings in elementary school. They related how PTA members “looked down” on them because of marriage status, age, race, and social class. In addition, those who had not attended these school-sponsored meetings indicated that family members or close friends who did attend faced racial conflict and tension. Some administrators, community members, and African American parents agreed that this city’s middle school PTA and school board meetings were hijacked by certain White parents who only wanted to further the educational interest of their children by encouraging and maintaining policies that continued the duplicity of equality in school. This took the form of “secret” meetings and social networks that excluded parents from the African American community. African American parents who attended these school-sponsored meetings confronted uncomfortable environments because they were looked upon as “other” in these spaces.

CONCLUSION

Despite the Brown v. Board of Education (1954) decision, Civil Rights movement, and policies to end discrimination, our nation still has a long way to go to ensure social and economic justice for all Americans. Deeply rooted racial ideologies have led to disinvestment in Black communities and produced separate and unequal educational experiences in racially diverse as well as predominantly Black schools. Therefore, African Americans continue to grapple with a duplicity of equality, which proclaims equality for all, but far too often sorts and confines them into places where they receive an unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and knowledge.

Many African American students and parents are confronted with a duplicity of equality in schools that have the potential to be the great equalizer, but that often actually sort them into lower-track classes. Moreover, many African Americans are confined to communities plagued with systemic inequalities that heavily impact educational outcomes; then, students and parents are often blamed for not living up to their “end of the deal.” This ethnographic study illustrates the ways social stratification is perpetuated through intergenerational tracking
in a racially diverse school that serves a Black community. Specifically, this research unveils how the duplicity of equality is experienced and confronted in the lives of African American parents as they navigate their children’s academic opportunities.

The mechanisms perpetuating this duplicity were perceived by African American parents in their sense of being controlled by the White power structure instead of belonging in their child’s schooling environment. This was evident in the way African American parents made sense of the school choice policy; some did not fully believe that they could freely choose their child’s academic placement nor that higher placement would guarantee improvement in their children’s life trajectories. These findings suggest that tracking research should continue to explore African American parents’ struggles with controlling factors and how they relate to their children’s academic placement and overall educational experiences. Academic choice can never be fully implemented if African American parents do not perceive they can freely choose their children’s schooling experiences and thus influence their life trajectories. Moreover, policies, practices, and procedures must assure parents that their children will be socially and emotionally safe in academically challenging environments. These findings suggest that racially diverse schools must create environments in upper-track classes where African American parents feel their children’s social and emotional needs will be met and not compromised. After interviewing African American parents, I contend that schooling for them was not an empowering and enriching educational experience, but rather a site of racial tension and control.

In addition to controlling factors in the school, the exposure of African American students and parents to systemic inequalities in their home and community heavily influenced their educational experiences and academic placement. African Americans in this study lived in a disinvested community that faced the struggles of unemployment, housing, crime, violence, and drug addiction. This research confirms that these hurdles largely affect African American educational experiences and academic placement. In other words, academic placement in a school is strongly related to “placement” in a community. This suggests that researchers, policymakers, and scholars who address desegregation and tracking in schools must also examine the disinvestment affecting many African American communities and causing major stumbling blocks to successful academic outcomes. If schools provide access to upper-track classes while communities remain heavily disinvested, many students will find it very challenging to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for college and upward mobility.
This research builds onto a larger body of social scientific research that suggests there are multiple layers involved in dismantling racialized tracks in school and ensuring academic success for African American students and a welcoming environment for their parents (A. Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Tyson, 2011). The present research provides current-day findings that tracking was not only about talents, abilities, and skills, but about powerful elite groups in the city and school that intentionally wanted to maintain a duplicity of equality (Oakes et al., 1997). In this study, while school administrators aimed to detrack the middle school, middle-class White parents maintained their distinction from poor African American families by forming their own social media to share valuable information about tracking and other school-related policies and events. In addition, school board members and influential social actors in the city worked with some White parents to promote an unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and knowledge.

Wells and Serna (1996) explored how White parents used their cultural capital to maintain tracking in a racially diverse school. The present research shows how, 20 years later, some White parents continued to block access to upper-track classes for African American students, revealing that not only do parents use cultural capital to navigate the educational system more effectively, but some also strategically aim to block African Americans from access because of deeply rooted prejudice concerning talents, abilities, and behavior. Moreover, Kevin Welner’s (2001) research in Woodland Hills, Pennsylvania, suggested that some teachers and White parents were “defiant” toward detracking reforms and worked together to resist the reform. Parents in the present study used a “secret” meeting with teachers and administrators to resist. In addition, they used modern technology through Facebook to communicate and collaborate on resistance to detracking policies.

Not only do these findings help us to explore the current-day mechanisms used to maintain tracking in school, they provide a fuller description of tracking by highlighting the voices and experiences of African American parents: the individuals who daily confront the duplicity of equality. African American parents showed how intergenerational tracking impacted their children and helped legitimize the unequal distribution of resources in their homes and community. They spoke candidly about the racial discrimination and neighborhood inequalities that affect academic placement in racially diverse schools. Moreover, they illuminated ways social actors use new mechanisms to block African Americans from fully benefitting from high-status knowledge, resources and opportunities. While many Americans want schools to be the great equalizer, the duplicity of equality continues in racially diverse schools through tracking.
Based on these findings, I propose the following policy recommendations:

**Access is not enough.** Giving African American students access to advanced courses will not guarantee that they will take upper-track classes in a racially diverse school. There is a history of influential White social actors working behind the scenes to block them from receiving high-status knowledge in racially diverse classrooms. Interviews with African American parents show that some are aware and aim to protect their children from environments that they perceive could be hostile; they therefore opt for standard and lower-track classes. African American parents are thinking about the overall well-being of their children. Therefore, schools must do a better job of protecting African American students from hostile environments in upper-track classrooms, and must also inform parents of how they are providing safe environments for their children to learn in advanced courses.

**Allocate resources to students’ communities.** The Coleman Report (1966) provided ample evidence that what happens outside of school has a major impact on academic achievement. In my study, I discovered neighborhood inequalities affect students’ academic placement. Too much attention has been placed on changing the hearts of some middle class White parents in the battle to detrack schools. School districts should redirect this energy to working with local, state, and government agencies to address neighborhood inequalities. Students who face concentrated poverty and neighborhood inequalities suffer the most academically. Parents I spoke with pointed to housing inequality, violence, food insecurity, police brutality, crime, and an underground drug economy that prevented an environment of learning in their homes and affected academic placement and achievement. My findings show that we have underestimated how much neighborhood inequalities hinder parents from supporting, and students from achieving, academic success.

**Clearly communicate with parents regarding educational reforms.** The need to work multiple jobs, painful past educational experiences, and racial discrimination in PTA and school board meetings prevent African American parents from attending school-sponsored events. School administrators should develop meaningful relationships with community members, pastors, and parents to ensure they understand current policies. School districts can use technology to communicate clear, concise messages to parents. Short and to-the-point videos explaining reforms can be sent to emails and phones. For example, Harvard University professor Todd Rogers’s randomized control trials (Kraft & Rogers, 2015; Rogers & Feller, 2018) indicate that text messaging and mailing letters home to parents regarding chronically absent students results in
increased attendance. School personnel can also use these forms of messaging to offer African American parents multiple ways to access and process information on academic placement and school policies.

*Value the knowledge.* African American students and parents bring a wealth of knowledge to schools; their knowledge and experiences should be respected and valued. In this study, many administrators and teachers intentionally wanted African American students to close the “achievement gap” and to be in upper-track classes, yet they relied heavily on deficit framing when discussing the African American community. They felt that African Americans were to blame for the neighborhood inequalities and often viewed the community as “dysfunctional.” In addition, they put the blame on African American parents for not coming to PTA meetings and school-sponsored events. They were unaware of the impacts of racial discrimination, poverty, and the unequal distribution of resources that African American parents encountered. This lack of information impaired relationships between school personnel and the African American community. Valuing and respecting the experiences of the African American community will be necessary to foster more meaningful relationships.

*Representation at all levels is important.* In this study, no teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, or aides lived in the African American community. There was only one Black teacher. Given the reality of school-based racial tensions, racially diverse schools that are committed to detracking must do a better job of hiring African Americans as teachers, aides, and administrators. In my interviews, several parents told me that they applied for jobs with the school district, but never received a call back. In addition, mentoring programs employing African American community members could be established; these individuals would also become a liaison between the school and community.

One limitation of this study is that I was unable to follow up with the African American parents when their children reached high school. Future research should examine what happens to these students in high school and what additional obstacles parents face. In addition, research should focus on what happens to the few African American students who take upper-track classes, and whether they gain upward mobility. Also, further research is needed to give more detailed information on how neighborhood inequalities impact academic performance. Future research should further examine what additional support and interventions African American parents need to help overcome the duplicity of equality in their home, school, and community.

Through careful attention to the voices of African American parents whose children confronted racialized tracking in a racially diverse
school, this study illuminates the adverse effects on students’ academic experiences fostered by historic discrimination, present-day inequalities, and strategies intentionally deployed to maintain social stratification through intergenerational tracking. These findings inform specific policy recommendations to redress some of the injustices identified, and so pursue the dismantling of the duplicity of equality in our public education system.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank Robert Balfanz, Carolyn Riehl, Ernest Morrell, Aaron Pallas, Ann Maouyo, James Earl Davis, and Amy Stuart Wells for their multiple contributions to this study.
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This Appendix is provided to elucidate the thought process through which I generated and refined the coding categories used to analyze recorded interviews in this qualitative study. To provide the context, I will briefly describe my own journey over the course of this study in three phases: (1) assumptions, (2) development of a conceptual framework, and (3) data analysis.

My Assumptions: Retraining the Qualitative Researcher

Field research can be difficult, painful, and provocative. When I began my pilot study, I thought I knew a lot about tracking, education, and African American communities. I had grown up in an African American community in Southern California and had spent several years researching these topics. I believed that racial integration and detracking schools would resolve racial problems and educational inequalities by offering African Americans access to the same resources, opportunities, and educational tracks as their White peers.

However, during field research that included observing the city and talking to community members, parents, and school administrators, I came to realize that I was very naïve about the everyday struggles of most African Americans living in communities of concentrated poverty. These African American students and parents spoke of a problem that was more nuanced and complex. Their lives were completely different from that of the Whites in the city; they spoke about neighborhood inequalities, racial discrimination and brutality, and influential social actors in the school and city that perpetuated the unequal distribution of resources. As an ethnographic researcher, I am committed to the voices and agency of those with whom I interact in the field. My observations and interactions led me to a new understanding: access would not solve all the problems. Rather, multiple layers of inequalities must be sorted out and identified.

The Ethnographer as Conceptualizer

I quickly became aware of how segregated and unequal the lives of African American were in comparison to their White counterparts. While I initially assumed that African Americans did not patronize certain restaurants and businesses for economic reasons, I soon learned that this was...
not the case: when I visited these establishments myself, I was treated differently from White patrons. African American residents did not enjoy the same parks, beaches, or cultural activities as Whites. Perhaps most importantly, no African Americans from this community held local government positions, whether entry-level or higher ranking. They did not work in City Hall, the police department, the fire department, or the school district—even though representatives of all these institutions spoke warmly of equality. Many felt that they could only get jobs “picking up trash.” I wondered how so many people could allege equality while an unequal distribution of capital was maintained over generations in this city. This discrepancy guided my development of a conceptual framework that centered on the duplicity of equality.

Within this larger framework, I focused my research on understanding how African Americans come to terms with academic placement in a racially diverse school, by probing the mechanisms within the home and community that impact academic performance. I wanted to know the root of this duplicity in the city and the directions it was taking. I also wanted to learn the relationship between duplicity and intergenerational tracking.

I developed an interview protocol that focused on three major components: roots, or causal mechanisms; routes (current experiences); and academic tracks (see Figure 1). I developed questions associated with each section (see Parents’ Interview Protocol, Appendix B).

**Roots:** These questions were developed to bring a historical analysis and connect it to the current social context. The earlier fieldwork of Dubois (1899) with the *Philadelphia Negro* and the several reports he helped produce at the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory informed my understanding of the field researcher’s responsibility to connect history to the current-day “Negro problem.”

**Routes:** These questions were developed to elicit detailed information on the thoughts, ideas, and practices of African Americans and the systemic inequalities they faced in their home and community. I looked to them as agents, dynamic social actors who make meaning out of their world as they aim to overcome obstacles. After three years of observation, I realized that the mere act of survival in a city that unequally distributed resources, opportunities, and knowledge was a form of agency.

**Tracks:** These questions were developed to gain insight as to how parents perceive and address academic placement in a racially diverse school district. While researchers are aware of the over-identification of African Americans in special education and
lower-track classes, there is still much to be learned by listening to African American parents. This includes their prior educational experiences and their perceptions of their child’s educational experiences.

*The Ethnographer as Coder and Analyzer*

The questions themselves generated several topical codes. In addition, many codes emerged from my interviews and field notes. After each day of interviewing, I would review my notes and look for common themes. Often, these corresponded to codes already identified, but in some cases, notes prompted generation of new codes. Here are some of the codes identified:

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<td>Segregation City</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Migration</td>
<td>Resources in Community</td>
<td>Upper Track</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Privilege</td>
<td>Lack of Resources</td>
<td>Lower Track</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put in One’s Place</td>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>Negative Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>Positive Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>Guidance Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shame</td>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>Parents Edu. Exp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microaggressions</td>
<td>Positive Community</td>
<td>Afterschool Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global/ Economy</td>
<td>Black Church</td>
<td>Cultural Curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereotype</td>
<td>Hip Hop</td>
<td>PTA Meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Police Brutality</td>
<td>Race &amp; Placement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Segregation</td>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>Segregation School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Advantages in Community</td>
<td>Caring Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Community Agent</td>
<td>Institutional Agent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After conducting the research, I entered all the codes into Dedoose online software. I also uploaded all the transcribed interviews. For the present study, I read the African American parents’ interviews several times. During these readings, I marked all the topic codes alluded to in each interview (see “Sample Coded Interview Excerpt,” Appendix C). Subsequently, in that analysis, I identified all the quotes that contained references to a given code, using the appropriate software features. Then, by juxtaposing the relevant quotes, I could determine the common themes and perspectives on the topic in question. (Sample analysis for the term “employment” is provided below in Appendix D.)
In some cases, after linking a text to a code, I would aim to see if other social actors’ views confirmed or complemented the voices of African American parents. I triangulated the data by comparing references in the interviews with White parents, teachers, students, community leaders, and school administrators. I developed a chart to help me with the triangulation process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This involved identifying each speaker, and whether they agreed or disagreed that a given perception was accurate. The phase “secret PTA meeting” will be used as an example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Secret PTA Meeting Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance Counselor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guidance Counselor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guidance Counselor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this case, I wanted to know if African American parents were the only ones who thought the meeting was a secret. However, community leaders, school administrators, and guidance counselors also confirmed that some White parents had demanded a meeting with school administrators to which African American parents were specifically not invited.

I also used documents to help validate the data (Maxell, 1992). When parents discussed racial riots and tension within the city, I looked for newspaper articles to verify these events. The school district also provided access to several notices that were sent home to parents, information on students’ academic placement, and data on the percentage of students in advanced courses. These documents were used to help analyze and code the data, but only as a complement to the voices and experiences of African American parents.

The coding process evolved in a continuous attempt to answer my research questions, as I continued to ask, What codes help me understand how African American parents come to terms with academic placement, and what mechanisms within their home and community impact their children’s academic performance? I focused intently on remarks associated with these codes, seeking to understand what African American parents were expressing.

I printed out all the codes and quotes and then linked them to their categories of roots, routes, and tracks. As I retyped them, I reflected on the connections between codes and quotes, identifying patterns that emerged from the data. I selected the codes and quotes that reflected the views most commonly expressed and that brought new insights to the research.
questions. These quotes formed the basis for an outline for each category. In my analysis, I aimed to highlight and connect the quotes to illuminate the voices of African American parents.

As this account indicates, interviews, conversations, and observations carried out during ethnographic research are dynamic elements that may lead the researcher in new directions, bringing new insights and addressing gaps in the literature (G. Anderson, 1989; Duneier, Kasinitz, & Murphy, 2014; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Willis & Trondman, 2000). For these reasons, the researcher must be open to the new perspectives and be willing to incorporate them honestly.
APPENDIX B

Parents’ Interview Protocol

**Routes/ Community**

What is your name?

What is your ethnicity?

How long have you been living in this city?

Where are your parents from?

Do you like living in this city?

If so, why? Why not?

Are there advantages to living in this city?

If so, what are some of the advantages?

Are their disadvantages to living in this city?

If so, what are some of the disadvantages?

What area do you live in?

How would you describe the area?

Did you pick the area you live in?

Do you believe you can live anywhere in this city?

Which area do you feel the most comfortable in?

I will name some areas and I would like for you to tell me if you find these places comfortable for you and your children:

- City Hall?
- Public Library?
- School?

Are there some advantages that Whites have that blacks do not have in the city?

If so, can you give me some examples?

What would you say to a person who believes that Whites and Blacks are treated equally in the city?

If they believe Blacks just do not work hard enough?

If they believe Blacks are just not connected to the right people?

If they believe Black culture does not allow them to achieve?

Do you think your area receives the same amount of attention and resources as other areas?

What would you change about the area you live in?
How do you think others perceive this area?
Are there places where you interact with people from other areas?
How do surrounding areas perceive the people who live in your community?
Do you believe that public spaces give privileges or advantages to whites?
   If so, how?
Are there any issues that your community is facing?
   If so, can you name a few?
   Are other areas facing these issues?
Can you walk me through your typical day?
Are you affiliated with any churches in this city?
   How do you view your church?
   Why did you pick your church?
   Does your church have any educational programs?
Are there after-school programs for students in the community?

**Tracking/School**

How many children do you have?
How many attend school in this district?
How many attend the middle school?
   What are their names?
What are your views on the school district?
Are there some things you would like to change about the school district?
Are there some things in the district that are working?
Do you believe your child is in the right classes?
Do you think your child is being intellectually challenged?
Are there different levels at the school?
Who decides which level or classes your child should attend?
What are your views on accelerated courses?
Do you think that students gain advantages by attending higher-level/accelerated classes?
Do you believe that course assignment has long-term consequences?
   If so, how?
Would you allow your child to take higher track classes if he/she was the only black student in the class?
Do you believe most students in higher-level classes are from other areas in the city?
    If so, why do you believe they are in the higher-level classes?

Do you believe they are smarter? Work harder? Or are black students are discriminated against?

Where do you perceive your child belongs with respect to educational levels?
    Why?

Do you believe you can change the level of your child’s classes?

Has your child taken any special education classes?
    If so, do you believe the classes are catering to his/her educational needs?

Have you spoken to a teacher regarding your child’s courses?
    If you have, do the teachers think that your child is in the correct class?

Have you spoken to a guidance counselor regarding your child’s courses?

Let me know if you feel comfortable talking to these individuals at the school:
    Teachers? If not, why?
    Guidance counselors? If not, why?
    Administrators? If not, why?

Do you ever attend school board meetings?
    If so, how would you describe your experience?
    Was it a safe place for you to voice your concerns?
    Do parents from your area attend these meetings?

Do you ever attend PTA meetings?
    If so, how would you describe your experience?
    If so, was it a safe place for you to voice your concerns?
    If so, did you feel comfortable in the space?
    If so, what would you change about the meetings?

Do you think you have the same privileges as White parents in the school district?

Do you think that administrators and teachers treat White parents differently from people from your area?

Do you think your voice would be heard as loud as that of parents who live in other areas?

Do you think administrators and teachers value your insight and knowledge?
Do you share information regarding your child or community to help bring insight to them?
If so, does this insight improve your child’s educational experiences?

Are there parent/teacher meetings?
If so, do you attend?

Did you attend school in this district?
If so, did you have relationships with White students?
If so, can you describe your experiences with the teachers?

What level were you in when you attended school?

Do you think that if you were in a different level you would have had different experiences in school?
If so, can you give me some examples?

Roots

How would you explain race relations in this city?

Do all residents have the same opportunities?

Are there some issues that African Americans face that Whites do not have to encounter?
If so, can you give me some examples?

Do you believe that your child will have to encounter discrimination in this city?
If so, can you give me some examples?

What is the hugest stumbling block that your child would have to overcome because of his race?

Do you believe that your child can reach his/her goals in this city?

Do you encounter racial stereotypes?
If so, what kind?

What are your views on integration?

Do you encounter racially diverse spaces?
If so, how do you feel in these spaces?
How do whites perceive you?

Do you believe that Whites have advantages in racially diverse spaces?
If so, can you give me some example?

What are some of your views regarding White people in this city?

What information would you like to give me that I have not asked you?
APPENDIX C

Sample Coded Interview excerpt (from interview with June)

Codes Used: Trust (T), Oppression (O), Put in one’s Place (PIP), Agency (A), Educational Needs Not Meet (ENNM), School Failure (SF), Not Challenge Students (NCS), Parents Educational Experiences (PEE), Special Education (SE), Race and Academic Placement (RAP), Employment (EM)

Researcher: Why do you say you don’t trust them?
June: (T) I just do not trust them. (O) I just believe that they don’t want black, black kids, to progress and they will take one thing and just blow it out of proportion just to hold them back and to (PIP) put them in their place. That’s what I strongly believe and they know that because I’ve (A) expressed it to them so they know how I feel. (ENNM) It’s unfortunate that I feel this way but I knew a lot of black kids that graduated high school who can barely read. After all those years of school can barely read, can’t even do fifth grade work. I know a lot of kids that are like that. Can barely write, can’t even talk properly. (SF) That’s what the schools are for.

Researcher: Tell me a little bit about your experience when you were in middle school and high school?
June: It was high school also. It’s just that they don’t take the time out for the kids to see other options. (NCS) They don’t challenge them, they don’t give them more work in the classes when they’re done with their work. I don’t know, it’s just the teachers are not strict enough for me, they’re not tough enough. Just not.

Researcher: Did you graduate from high school?
June: (PEE) Yes I did.

Researcher: How was your experience?
June: I did well.

Researcher: Did they have honors courses back then?
June: (PAP) Yes they did. I wasn’t in honors classes though. I was in mainstream. I was just in mainstream. (SE) There were a lot of black kids in special ed. (RAP) Of all of the white people, only one white boy was in special education, back when I was in middle school. I’ll never forget it. The whole class was black except for one white boy. His name was Ken White. I’ll never forget him. I see him around sometimes. (EM) He got a better job than me now.
APPENDIX D

Sample Analysis (for Code “Employment”)

Parents Interviewed: Walter and Stacey

Code Applied: Employment

Walter: You can’t walk up in a certain place; you can’t go up in a certain shop and say or by a simple shop over there and say, “Listen, I want a job.” As a teenager I felt intimidated to go there. I dare you go there. You know you’re not getting hired. You can’t go to certain places that’s going to make any money out here besides the City and you’re going to work …

Stacey: On the garbage truck.

Walter: On the garbage truck for $7 an hour.

Stacey: In the rain, in the snow.

Walter: Out here this is what they do to you.

Stacey: It’s probably $8 now.

Walter: It’s $8 now. You know dumping garbage; you know garbage men are supposed to make more in that.

Stacey: You can research on that too.

Walter: That be good. Okay.

Parent Interviewed: Tammy

Codes Applied: Employment

Researcher: How can we make this situation better for blacks in this city? What do African Americans need in this city?

Tammy: I don’t know. Some kind of representative. They need employment. And good jobs.

Researcher: Anything else?

Tammy: Employment again employment

Parent Interviewed: Tonya

Codes Applied: Employment

Researcher: What happened to the people that you went to school with?

Tonya: They’re around.
Researcher: How are they doing?
Tonya: Half the guys work for the city. The sewer department. Would that be sewer, sanitation? They collect trash
Researcher: Was there any black people who did extremely well and they’re doing well now?
Tonya: Not really, but some did leave

Parent Interviewed: Maggy

Codes Applied: Employment

Researcher: Are there a lot of jobs for . . . ?
Maggy: No. I think that’s why a lot of them go to jail, because it’s no jobs here. It’s nothing for them to do but to get in trouble and go to prison. I was just talking to someone the other day about that, where it’s no jobs in this city. Only job is for the black people, if you ask me, is working on the garbage trucks. You don’t have too much business that has black people working in them. You go on Park Avenue, there’s no business that have black people really in them. You might have a Mexican or someone like that, but you don’t see no black people working at some of these . . . most of the restaurants and the stores on Park Avenue. They need to have more jobs in . . . this city, but they don’t.

Researcher: Why do you think . . . why they do not hire black people?
Maggy: I believe some of them are prejudiced. I do believe that. I feel like if a Caucasian can do the job, I believe an African American can do the job. I believe some of them just don’t want to give black people the chance to do it. That’s what I believe.

Parent Interviewed: Kim

Codes Applied: Employment

Kim: The drugs in this community, it’s bad if you ask me. It’s bad. I really wish it wasn’t like it is. It’s bad. I hate to say it, but it’s our people that are out here that’s selling the drugs and it’s making us look bad. I believe that was another reason why a lot of the black boys are here turning to doing what they doing. Like I said, there’s no jobs out here but that’s what it is. A lot of drugs out there. They can only do sanitation jobs. Most of them come from prison and they figure, “Ain’t no job going
to hire me, because I got too many felonies,” this, that and the other, so they go to the garbage trucks. That’s the only place they’re going to hire them. That’s all you see is black guys on them trucks.

Parent Interviewed: Mrs. Jones

Codes Applied: Employment

Mrs. Jones: It’s okay, I’ve been there for seven and a half years; it’s all right.

Researcher: How is employment here in this city?

Mrs. Jones: Not too good.

Researcher: It’s not good?

Mrs. Jones: No.

Researcher: And it’s really hard to find jobs out here?

Mrs. Jones: I could not find a job here. I work in another city.
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