

Problematizing Academic Tracking in US K-5 Schooling: An Autoethnography

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates the impact of academic tracking on the experiences of K-5 students of color in the US through a braided autoethnography that combines the experiences of the author with existing literature on K-5 student performance. Through this investigation, I attempt to demonstrate how the miseducation of children from minoritized communities persists, acting as a barrier to academic achievement and ultimate social mobility, thus contributing to racial disparities in schooling. Furthermore, I expand on school context research by providing an account of how academic tracking in predominately low-socioeconomic status (SES) neighborhoods negatively impacts school transitions. The data is a collection of three narratives related to personal experience with K-5 education and explores themes of navigating autonomy with authority figures, the bridge between identity and the educational experience, and the institutional value of success. I analyze the data through a system of grounded theory, manual coding using a thematic approach to identify trends within the narratives. This study has important implications for the argument against the use of academic tracking in K-5 schools in the US in order to foster educational equity for minoritized communities.

*Keywords:* academic tracking, autoethnography, K-5 education

### **Identity at the intersection of race and ability**

I was in kindergarten when I was identified “gifted.” At the time, I was reading at a higher level than the rest of the class, and so my teacher felt that it would be best for me to spend time learning in a first-grade classroom. Just like that, the administration decided that, in some ways, I was too prepared for kindergarten, and just prepared enough for a first-grade curriculum. All the while, I was given no say in the decision, but I was just as excited by all means. Having the opportunity to join a first-grade class felt like the biggest accomplishment, because I was

being recognized as having potential. From then on, during the reading portion of the school day, I would leave the classroom with my notebook and walk down the hall, take a left at the corner and walk down another hall, and then take a right onto another hall to reach my new class. In the classroom were students that were either my age or a year older, we were separated by this socially-determined measure of academic capacity. Due to the very fact that I was transplanted from my group of peers into a new situation where I was responsible for navigating the rules of the classroom and the stressful situation of making new friends, I felt out of place and would come to learn that academic performance was not conflated with emotional intelligence.

One memory that I have occurs during reading time one day, in which the whole first-grade class gathered on this carpet in the middle of the classroom, sitting crisscross applesauce, to listen to the teacher read a book. In front of me, two boys were getting into an argument which was starting to devolve into pushing and, wanting them to stop, I decided to take my notebook and hit them both on the back of the head. This surprised and stopped them both, though I was reprimanded by the teacher and taken aside to be reminded that my actions were not ok and that hitting other students is not something that is acceptable in the first grade.

At the end of the year, my kindergarten teacher and the principal of the school wanted to have a meeting with my mom and grandparents about my experience in first-grade. They were advocating that since I had spent the year in first-grade, it was possible for me to skip the grade and proceed on to second grade. At the time, this was exciting for me because it was an opportunity to move up a grade, which was something that not many kids were given the opportunity to do. I felt that it would set me apart from the rest of my peers, but my mom decided that it was not the best decision for me. Understanding the level of privilege that I was afforded, with an opportunity that was only extended to me because of the label “gifted,” was

withheld from many of the other students in the school for no fault of their own prompted me to address how the miseducation of children from minoritized communities persists, acting as a barrier to academic achievement and ultimate social mobility. More specifically, I problematize the ways in which the allocation of resources advantages students in higher tracks, while students in lower tracks are effectively left behind.

I think it is important to assert my identity as an African-American male because of the political nature of my identity. Through de jure and de facto discrimination, the United States' period of slavery, and subsequent Jim Crow era, caused the disenfranchisement of African American citizens from political and social advancement. Consequently, I have faced multiple disadvantages in light of systemic discrimination inside and outside of school, but important to my journey throughout my K-5 education was the notion that I succeeded in spite of some factor or another. This notion is critical to my exploration of the theme of the bridge between identity and educational experience. My elementary school was situated in a predominately low-income area in Norfolk, Virginia, in fact, it was adjacent to two public housing communities: Diggs Town and Oakleaf Terrace. Now, as the residents of these areas, we referred to them as Diggs Park and Oakleaf Park. Typically, the term used to describe the students from these two areas was "park kids," which was an indication of the interplay between environment and behavior, with the understanding that we were predominately black. Both neighborhoods are known for high poverty, crime, and drug use. These social realities can serve as an explanation for the negative behaviors of park kids, who can be seen as a product of exposure to negative circumstances, like generational poverty. In an interview that I conducted with my grandma, who has lived in the area for more than 40 years, she described Campostella Elementary as a "neighborhood school," indicating that a majority of the students came from Diggs Park and

Oakleaf Park. The result of this phenomenon is that the school was about 90% African American students, which the literature establishes as having a strong, positive correlation with high percentages of students on free or reduced-price lunch, an indicator of poverty levels in schools (Clayton, 2011; de Brey et al., 2019). Moreover, the literature reveals that, in Fall 2015, 58% of black students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools attended schools with at least 75% minority enrollment, while the same was true for only 5% of white students (de Brey et al., 2019). This presents one of the ways that districting, which homogenizes experiences within neighborhood schools, serves as a source of educational inequity.

### **Institutional Value of Success**

The next theme that I want to present is the effect of the institutional value of success with reference to the ways that tracking separates students. There are two methods of tracking: ability-grouping systems and leveling systems (Burriss & Garrity, 2008). Ability-grouping systems work to assign students to different classes based on their perceived ability, while leveling systems require students to proceed through the same prerequisite courses to end up in the same classes. Additionally, Burriss & Garrity note that tracking begins with screening that can take place as early as kindergarten, which was the situation that I faced as the school placed me on the gifted track. Nonetheless, in the second grade I came to terms with how fragile this “gifted” identity was. One peer in another class was having a discussion about how her teacher had told her that her class was for the gifted students in the school, to which I rebutted that I was also gifted. This peer proceeded to assert that if I was gifted, then I would be in her class too, but I made the point that there probably were not enough spaces in her class for all of the gifted students to fit.

This example demonstrates the way that my elementary school employed the ability-grouping system to my K-5 education, which in some ways was a source of tension between students. The language that the teachers of gifted used also served to distance us from the other students of the school. In light of this focus on success and ability, the other students were called “regular,” which made reference to their aptitude. This manifested in the provision of greater resources for gifted students, which Burris & Garrity (2008) posit is a site of contention as teachers that are aware of this distinction might be likely to put forth less effort into teaching the students that were placed on a lower track. Woodson (1933) enumerates the injustices that black students face in educational systems that are not privy to the needs of the students, which given the environmental context of being in areas of high poverty, leaves many students systematically disadvantaged throughout their entire educational journey. These students will have to spend more time catching up to their peers as a result of an unequal distribution of resources on behalf of the school.

Likewise, the institutional focus on success disadvantages students from minoritized backgrounds from having access to high quality teachers. In the interview of my grandma, she makes mention of the way that she was impressed with how much the teachers at Campostella cared about teaching. The problem came with the development of charter schools and specialty programs, which meant that these teachers left the school for schools where there was better pay and access to increased resources. The issue of qualified teachers leaving schools in under-resourced schools is documented in the literature as significantly correlating with schools in relationship to the proportion of students that are white (Clayton, 2011). This means that schools found in segregated neighborhoods are more likely to have disparities in educational outcomes, and knowing that black students are more likely to go to school where there is a high proportion

of minority students, this becomes a race-based issue. Still, it is necessary to note how schools are funded and what the sources of school funding are. When I was in elementary school, the students that were on free or reduced lunch were given green cardstock cards to take home for our parents to fill out and return to the school by a certain deadline. These were known as “federal cards” to us and they dictated the amount of funding that the school was able to receive from the government. It is unknown to myself or my grandma what other sources of funding the school had, but, given the context of proximity to high poverty areas, it is unlikely that government funding would be substantial enough to override the negative effects of generational poverty like material deprivation, thereby presenting an additional push factor for experienced teachers to leave schools located in high poverty areas.

### **Coopting reading as a financial enterprise**

Nevertheless, my school did have schoolwide indicators of success in the Virginia SOLs, the most important of which were the math and reading ones. Starting in the third grade, math and reading scores become important indicators of future educational success (Langenkamp, 2018; de Brey et al., 2019). In particular, my school placed particular emphasis on the reading capabilities of students through a program called Accelerated Reader (AR), which was a program of judging the reading levels of all of the students through a reading comprehension test at the beginning of the year that then decided the level of books that a student was encouraged to check out from the library. In the library, there was a system of organizing the books by genre and then alphabetically. On the spine of every book was a colored sticker: blue, red, green, orange, pink, yellow, or black that indicated the reading level of the book. On the inside of the cover of the book was a reading label that held information like the title and author of the book, the reading level assigned to the book, which was a number 1 through 12 that correlated to an academic

grade, and the number of points that book was worth on an AR quiz. The reason that the points were important was because the school treated this like a schoolwide competition, and the higher the level of the book, the more points it was worth on the reading quiz. I remember that the book “It” by Stephen King was the book worth the most points in the library and was designated with the highest reading level.

Interestingly, the system worked in a manner so that students could not read books that were higher than their reading level, but could read all of the books that were below it. Each year, the teacher would assign a point goal per week, and as a student’s level increased, so did the amount of points that each student was expected to earn. This provided an incentive to read books below level, as it was easier to accumulate points reading shorter books than to try to read whole novels. Still, this system is what introduced me to my favorite book series, Harry Potter, though when I first discovered it, I did not know that the books were organized in any particular order and read Chamber of Secrets first because my school library did not have the first book. At the time, it was hard to decipher whether I was reading for love or reading, or because of external motivation. The school would award students that met certain benchmarks with coupons to Pizza Hut or ice cream parties, though the greatest reward was the scholarships that Metro Machines, a manufacturing company that was in Norfolk at the time, awarded to the top three students in Campostella and St. Helena, the sister school. Through this system, I had accumulated over \$10,000 in scholarship money between third and fifth grade. Unfortunately, this system was set up to award students like me that were equipped with the skills to read above grade level because time was invested in me due to being identified gifted. Other students knew my name throughout the school because of how public the award ceremony was, which meant that I had many people that admired and were envious of me at the same time. Ultimately, there was no opportunity for

reconciliation because I was given something that meant that every other student would have to go without the additional funds to go towards a college education.

### **Confronting the privilege of being “identified gifted”**

Simultaneously, this experience was my introduction into tokenism, where I was touted as an exemplar of what a model student looked like, without acknowledgement of the structural factors that were cultivating my success. Other students were not so fortunate, as the National Assessment of Educational Progress demonstrates that in 2017, black students in the fourth grade were the worst performing racial group in a math assessment, with an average score of 223 out of 500, when the average was 240 out of 500 (de Brey et al., 2019). When compounded with SES, the ramification of this is that students from low SES that attend high poverty elementary schools demonstrate the lowest cumulative gains no matter the demographic of the middle school they end up in with regards to math score, implying that the most beneficial point of intervention is at the elementary school level (Langenkamp, 2018). When I was in fifth grade, the administration of the school advised that I apply to magnet school programs, which was a way of getting me into a middle where there were students of higher SES. Others from my elementary school were tracked into the same middle school, where problems of educational inequality only compounded. This represents the modern manifestation of the miseducation of black students that Woodson (1933) discusses, where students with low performance are left unequipped to aid their communities, because problems that have been established with high poverty schools are only propagated throughout the K-12 experience when there should be efforts to increase educational resources to reduce gaps in acclimation to subject material and performance on tests.

### **Conclusion**

As someone caught in the educational system as well, I acknowledge now that I was complicit in issues of inequality related to academic tracking because I was a beneficiary of preferential treatment. The treatment redirected resources that could have been used to enhance the academic experience of children not identified as gifted. For this reason, I was able to turn my identity, that the literature illustrates as a penalty in terms of educational outcomes, into a privilege with the identity label “gifted.” Nevertheless, reflecting on the way that the provision of additional resources aided me through my K-5 experience, I would assert that a necessary provision for K-5 education in the US is the detracking of schools. In effect, this would entail removing the lowest performing track in school to boost the level of equality between the education that different students receive (Burriss & Garrity, 2008). The first step would be to start the process where tracking initiates, and then get teachers on board with the decision to remove tracking. This would require negotiations of curriculum, but the proposed effect is a system in which the students and the parents are left with the final choice about classes, which are left open to all students. Nevertheless, the teacher would still be able to make suggestions about classes students to take, so that detracking forms a more stable partnership between the educational system and the family unit.

I also have to address my reservations in utilizing autoethnography as a means to confront this issue, because I simultaneously have to confront the ways in which I have been coopted by the educational system. For someone from my social background, this methodology comes across as “trauma porn,” meant to establish the ways in which narratives reflecting hard experiences can be warped for the purpose of soliciting false sympathy from those of a higher social status, which demonstrates a different form of inequality because of the interpretation of different levels of social priority attributed to lived experiences. With reference to the ways in

which aspects of my identity register as a penalty in education according to society, I interrogate the privilege afforded to those identified “gifted.” For instance, my current status as a sophomore at Duke University could be interpreted as a conversation that I legitimately had with my high school guidance counselor, who told me that I was doing really well for myself as a black male. My understanding of the way I have thus far approached education is through a fixed mindset because of the way my achievements have been justified by others as a product of how smart I am, rather than the result of the effort I put forth. Moreover, it is apt to address how this cues my experiences with escapism, in the way that I have used academic advantage to separate me from the social context that I grew up in, yet others from my same background have not had that same ability. In the context from which I write this, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, my college campus has closed and I am now back at home in proximity to a lot of the issues that I have tried to avoid. Now, my labels have adjusted so that I am again a park kid and these issues of educational inequality have real exemplars of lower levels of social mobility in high poverty areas, which is why an institutional shift of policy towards tracking, gifted programs, and detracking is necessary.

### **Methodology**

My study applies an autoethnographic approach to the research question of the impact of academic tracking on K-5 educational outcomes of students of color from minoritized communities. To this end, I wanted to explore the ways that miseducation, or rather educational practices that are not conducive to an equitable learning experience, act as a barrier to academic achievement and ultimate social mobility, thus contributing to racial disparities in schooling. Through a braided autoethnography, I hoped to reconcile my experiences as a black student from

a high poverty area with the existing literature about educational disparities that persist within the US.

Before beginning to collect data, I completed Duke University CITI and IRB training to be certified in the ethical conduct of research with human participants. Next, I collected three personal narratives that speak to my experiences in K-5 education, which were an educational autobiography, an interview that I conducted with my grandmother, and a school memory which was pertinent to my academic journey. I wanted to split the educational autobiography into two sections, the first part addressing my experiences and recollection of the school and the second part describing the school through publicly available data to discuss performance and demographics. I was not able to complete the second part as intended, as the elementary school that I attended was torn down for a new school building, while the data from the old school is now mixed in with the reported data for the new school. Due to drastic shifts in school format, moving from a K-5 format to K-8 and a shift in the paradigms guiding the educational curriculum, it was not possible to find data that would be true to my experiences. As such, the second part of the autobiography addressed memories I have about the school environment and interactions I recall between school, as an institution, and students. The interview that I conducted with my grandmother was centered around information about the school, addressing topics such as funding sources, the environment around the school, how the school was run, who determined the curriculum, and her overall impression of the school. The interview was conducted in person, but not visually-recorded, and her responses were typed during the course of the interview. The framework for the school memory was that of a short narrative, which I decided to incorporate into the introduction of this paper.

The method of data analysis that I utilized was a system of manual coding, which I applied to each of my data sources separately. I used a method of grounded theory coding, in which I generated descriptors to address the messages that the data revealed through a thematic approach, where I sought to investigate the overarching concepts present across the three data sources. The codes I adapted were “identity,” “systems,” “values,” “location,” and “structures,” which I then engaged with to create three main themes guiding my autoethnography, which were navigating autonomy with authority figures, the bridge between identity and the educational experience, and the institutional value of success. With consideration of the complexity of an autoethnographic approach, multiple iterations of coding were important to having a proper understanding of the data, though given the pressures and time constraints that I faced in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, I only completed two rounds of coding with these guidelines.

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