TRACKING, WITHIN-SCHOOL SEGREGATION, AND CAREER ASPIRATIONS: A CASE STUDY

By

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To Jilliane, Henderson, and Rosalind
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The majority of American public school students are placed into classes based on their achievement levels as translated by standardized measures and career interests, sorted into courses based on classifications such as fast, average, or slow. The practice of such sorting is referred to as tracking. Different curricular paths, or academic tracks, wield the power to direct the learning opportunities and future prospects available to students. Historically, advanced academic tracks have been reserved for White students, while Black and Latino students have represented the majority of the student population in lower tracks. In essence, tracking has served as a method for resegregating public schools.

Situated within scholarly research on tracking, within-school racial segregation, and student career aspirations, this qualitative study examines how three Black students in the mainstream program at a magnet high school in the Southeastern U.S. discussed their career aspirations. To examine how the participants articulated their career aspirations, this dissertation follows a case study methodology, using qualitative interviews and focus groups as the primary means of data collection. The collected data include field notes, face-to-face interview data from the three student participants, and
the transcript of the two focus group meetings. Cultivating an approach that allowed me to explore the lived experiences of students within the mainstream program, a case study methodology appropriately aided in examining how students perceived their experiences within global educational policies such as tracking on a local level.

The results indicate that while each of the participants aspired to attend college upon graduating from high school, disruption in their lives, their isolation from the social and cultural capital needed in order to successfully apply for colleges, and their academic status within their school would serve as hindrances in gaining access to the institutions that would help them accomplish their career aspirations. The data reveal a need to challenge educational policy such as tracking that has historically targeted and marginalized students of color and continues to provide unnecessary obstacles as they seek to reach their ambitions.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

In October 2014, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education’s (DOE) Office of Civil Rights, claiming New Jersey’s South Orange-Maplewood School District’s (SOMSD) tracking policies “disproportionately confine[d] students of color to lower-level classes” (American Civil Liberties Union). Through a press release, the DOE responded to the complaint, corroborating the ACLU’s claims, referring to tracking as “modern-day segregation” (Kohli, 2014), and acknowledging that the district’s “2,500 Black students are significantly underrepresented in advanced and higher-level learning opportunities” (U.S. Department of Education).

At Columbia High School in SOMSD, White students comprised 38 percent of the student population in 2014, while occupying 70 percent of the advanced track spots. In contrast, 70 percent of the lower-track classes were filled with Black students (American Civil Liberties Union; Kohli, 2014). The division along racial lines led one parent in the same school system to voice his concern over the apparent resegregation: “Now we arrive at the point—in 2014—where you can literally walk down a hallway in Columbia High School and look in a classroom and know whether it’s an upper-level class or a lower-level class based on the racial composition of the classroom” (Kohli, 2014).

Inadequate representation of students of color in advanced academic tracks is not exclusive to New Jersey. In fact, such practices are ubiquitous in American elementary and secondary schools. The majority of American public school students are placed into classes based on their achievement levels as translated by standardized
measures and purported career interests, sorted into courses based on classifications such as fast, average, or slow (Gamoran, 2009; Oakes, 2005). The practice of such sorting, or tracking, is intended to help teachers target instruction to the varying needs of their students (Gamoran, 2009). The different curricular paths, or academic tracks, wield the power to direct the learning opportunities and future prospects available to students.

In the United States, academic tracks were originally used to dictate the types of education and career options available for newly freed slaves at the end of the 19th century. The two postbellum educational tracks available for Southern Blacks included a classic, liberal arts curriculum and the more common industrial education track (Anderson, 1988). In the early 1900s, formal tracking began as a means to instruct and assimilate an influx of European immigrant students into American urban schools (Loveless, 1988). The tracks of the early 20th century set a precedent of organizing children by intelligence as dictated by standardized tests. Contemporary tracking in schools involves categorizing students into different academic programs, such as college preparatory, mainstream, or vocational. While the different tracks are designed to facilitate streamlining instruction for students with their future aspirations in mind, they have created schools within schools, where students are homogenously grouped based on their race and ethnicity, mirroring the social segregation in neighborhoods outside of schools. Indeed, schools, such as Columbia High School in New Jersey, are notorious for reproducing inequity and maintaining the social stratification ubiquitous in society (Apple, 2012; MacLeod, 2008), limiting and fostering social and economic opportunities for particular groups of Americans.
Scholarly Significance

Some of the earliest formal curricular tracks included Academic (college bound), General (employment), and Vocational (trade specific—e.g. carpentry, plumbing, auto mechanic) tracks. Krug (1960) felt that “track plans are never a substitute for counseling” (p. 546) and referred to such plans as “short cuts in the guidance process” that over time “limit student choice” (p. 176). He believed that limiting students to tracks based on a prescribed plan harms students in vocational programs who could benefit from some of the college preparatory courses. The notion that foreign languages, advanced mathematics, and advanced science courses are not suitable for vocational track students is shortsighted and damaging to those who could benefit from such material (Krug, 1960). Schools that look beyond track systems as a means for helping students decide their suitable courses are able to counsel and place students in the appropriate courses that match their choice and interests (Krug, 1960).

The most common contemporary tracks in American public schools are slight deviations from the ones Krug (1960) examined with his discerning eye. They include Advanced (e.g. AP, IB, and Cambridge), Honors (slightly more challenging than the Regular track), Regular, and Basic (usually a simplified curriculum tailored only for earning a high school diploma). For example, the research site for this study is a school that had a self contained International Baccalaureate (IB) magnet program. In theory, ability and achievement decide a student’s track placement. In practice, other factors, such as race and socioeconomic status have proven to be better predictors of the tracks schools place students (Au, 2013; Goodlad, 1984; Gorski, 2013; Haller, 1985; Lucas & Berends, 2007; Oakes, 2005).
While not referred to as “tracking” at the time, wealthy landowners, northern philanthropists, and African American leaders in the nineteenth century decided which academic tracks would be made available for newly-freed Southern Blacks immediately following the American Civil War (Anderson, 1988; DuBois, 1903; Washington, 1969). The dictation of academic tracks for Black students in American public schools continued in the twentieth century through the Cold War and into the Civil Rights period, where standardized test scores were used as scientific means to separate students and maintain racially segregated schools (Au, 2013; Baker, 2001; Burkholder, 2011; Fass, 1980; Sexton, 1961). Following the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1954 decision in Brown v. Board of Education declaring racial segregation within schools unconstitutional, Southern lawmakers searched for means to continue the legacy of racial segregation in public schools. One method included the implementation of magnet programs within schools with high minority populations. Effective in meeting the federal requirements of racial desegregation, magnet programs fostered racial segregation across academic tracks within the schools (Garner, 2005; Martinelli, 2015).

There is a robust body of scholarship linking tracking and student academic prospects. Ranging from works that acknowledge tracking’s ability to stratify learning opportunities for students in upper and lower tracks (Gamoran, 1987; Haller, 1985; Lucas & Berends, 2007; Oakes, 2005; Rosenbaum, 1976) to those that examine tracking’s effects on non-academic outcomes, such as student self concepts and career aspirations, (Chavous, Bernat, Schmeelk-Cone, Caldwell, Kohn-Wood, 2003; Howard, 2003; Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Marsh, 1984), much of the research on tracking points to the harmful nature of grouping students by ability.
The academic tracks in which schools place students have a pronounced effect on students’ academic self concept and future aspirations (Howard, 2003; Howard, Tunstall, & Flennaugh, 2016; Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Marsh, 1984; Oakes, 2005). Students in lower academic tracks in high school courses generally have negative academic self concepts and have more limited career aspirations than their peers who are in higher academic tracks (Chavous, et al, 2003; Howard, 2003). Researchers have argued that lower academic tracks are typically created for students of color and succeed in deterring their access to higher education (Howard, et al., 2016).

Contemporary research on tracking points to a sociological phenomenon enabled by the practice of sorting students—within-school segregation (Conger, 2005, 2009; Davis, 2014; Oakes, 1995; VanderHart, 2006). As schools become more racially diverse, tracking along racial lines becomes more pronounced (Davis, 2014; Haller 1985). Divergent tracks facilitate the creation of schools within schools, where students are grouped homogeneously by race and have limited contact with students from other groups (VanderHart, 2006). Such segregation fosters an atmosphere of “restricted opportunities and diminished outcomes” for students of color (Oakes, 1995, p. 681). Indeed, within-school segregation through tracking practices is a legal form of racial segregation in American public schools.

**Research Design**

Much of the scholarship on tracking, within-school segregation, and career aspirations uses quantitative, statistical analyses that compare academic tracks within and among different schools and tracks. While these studies are necessary and effectively underscore the issues with and consequences of tracking, they do not explore the perspectives and voices of the students within the tracks they analyze. This
study promises to begin filling that gap, accounting for the ways in which students experience the context of their schooling. With this dissertation, I seek to produce a study where students within the school system have a space to contribute to the scholarly dialogue. As such, this work explicitly describes the lives represented by the numbers in the aforementioned studies. Understanding how individuals contextualize their experiences within tracking can provide a “complex, detailed understanding of the issue” that can only be established by listening to the people within the tracks (Creswell, 2013, p. 48).

Research Question

Situated within these important areas of study and building off the works of these scholars, this dissertation examines how Black students in the mainstream program at a magnet high school talk about their college aspirations. In doing so, this dissertation places the students and their experiences at the center of the study, examining the context of their education, addressing the following question: How do Black students in a mainstream language arts classroom at a magnet high school talk about their career aspirations?

Methods and Methodology

To address the research question, this dissertation follows a case study methodology. Creswell (2013) defines a case study as a “qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system over time” (p. 97). Yin (2008) furthers the definition to emphasize case study as a mode of inquiry that investigates “a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (p. 18). The “case” must be a contemporary, complex functioning unit that is studied in its natural context (Johansson, 2003). For the purposes of this study, the case is Black students in a
mainstream program at a magnet high school, a school where I supervised practicing preservice teachers for two years prior to this study. Within this case, the bounded system is the mainstream track.

Cultivating an approach that will allow me to explore the lived experiences of students within the mainstream program at Washington High School (WHS), a case study methodology appropriately aids in examining how students perceive their experiences within global educational policies such as tracking on a local level. Interviews and a focus group meeting provided information on how students discussed their career aspirations. My field notes informed the context of the bounded system, or the mainstream program. These notes offered a detailed description of the physical space the students occupied daily. While the field notes do not necessarily represent the thoughts and ideas of the student participants, they presented supplementary information that helped shape the discussion in the interviews and focus group meetings. For instance, I used the assignments the students worked on in class and the discussions I overheard amongst the students and between the students and the teacher during my classroom observations as conversation starters.

Statistics, such as high school graduation rates, college acceptance rates, and college graduation rates, along with demographic data reported by WHS concerning the IB and mainstream programs helped inform this study. Primarily, however, my goal was to cast students from the mainstream program as the authorities to help me consider ways in which schooling has influenced their lives, having them teach me about the effects of tracking on their experiences throughout their educational journey and how they influenced their career aspirations.
To address my research questions, I collected and analyzed qualitative data using purposeful sampling of three student participants. During my first two visits to the research site in November 2016, I observed the same mainstream language arts classes, taking field notes. I noted the interactions of the students with their teacher and with each other. I followed the classroom observations with a discussion with the teacher about my intentions and the design of my research and how I could best achieve my goals. My observations, along with the input from the teacher, allowed us to pinpoint the students who participated in the study. Desirable traits included an inclination to participate in class discussions with the teacher and other students in the class and a willingness to approach the project with seriousness and honesty. The abbreviated nature of my visits to the research site did not allow me the time to properly build relationships with all of the students and suitably assess who possessed these traits. The classroom teacher, who discussed their personalities with me before finalizing the list of possible participants, was the most appropriate assessor of these characteristics because of her familiarity with the students.

During the following visits, I made the majority of my observations and field notes while conducting individual interviews with each of the three student participants using Seidman’s (2006) in-depth phenomenological interviewing model. The model suggests that researchers interview each of the participants on three separate occasions. According to Seidman (2006), “People’s behavior becomes meaningful and understandable when placed in context of their lives and the lives of those around them” (pp. 16-17). As such, a one-shot meeting without context and connection between researcher and participant “tread[s] on contextual ice” (Seidman, 2006, p. 17). Three
meetings allowed for me to gain more insight into their lives, which provided more context to the research I conducted.

During the first round of interviews, I asked the participants to share the breadth of their educational experiences from early childhood to the present (see Appendix A). It is also appropriate during the first interview to ask the participants to share their experiences within the academic tracks throughout the years. The purpose of the second round of interviews was to focus on the “present lived experience” within the mainstream track at WHS (Seidman, 2006, p. 18). During the third and final round of interviews, I asked the participants to “reflect on the meaning of their experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 18). This interview asked the participants to combine their educational history from the first interview with their present experiences in the second interview, clarifying the role tracking played in their lives.

In my final meeting with the students, after all of the interviews were completed, I held two focus group meetings with all of the participants. I used both individual interviews in combination with the focus group meetings, which allowed for students to listen to the other responses and add their own personal context (Merriam, 2009). According to Bernard (2011), people are also more likely to reveal more sensitive information in a supportive group situation. The social nature of focus groups can promote a group dynamic where participants with similar experiences construct meaning together and deepen discussion by building off comments from their peers. The camaraderie participants can build in focus groups fosters a supportive atmosphere where the members are more comfortable sharing their experiences and ideas.
Overall, this study combines the use of field notes, face-to-face interview data from the three student participants, and the transcript of the two focus group meetings. Privileging the students and their perspectives, I followed an open-ended interview protocol, imposing no restrictions on the participants and promoting a casual atmosphere (Reissman, 1993). The comfort of the participants fostered more dialogue between the researcher and participants (Madison, 2005). With the goal of centering the voices and actions of individual students within the mainstream program at WHS in order to understand their career aspirations and the reasons why they hold them, these data sources provided multiple opportunities and contexts for the participants to share their experiences and perspectives.

**Definition of Terms**

Tracking, for the purposes of this study, is defined as a form of curricular differentiation where schools organize students for instruction by their abilities into one of several academic paths. There are different measures individual schools and school districts use to sort students. Historically, the first tests used to track students were IQ tests. The most common evaluation tools today include results from standardized achievement examinations, such as the Stanford Achievement Test.

Many sources conflate the terms tracking and ability grouping. The two are not synonymous. Tracking differs from ability grouping in both scale and permanence (Gamoran, 1992). Ability groups are typically small, short-term clusters teachers create at the classroom level. For instance, teachers may assign students to groups based on their speed in mastering subject-specific standards or using any other set of classroom data. Tracking, in contrast, refers to curricular assignments of an entire school population based on measures decided upon by individual schools and school systems.
Historically, tracking policies allow students minimal flexibility with course selection and exhibit rare student mobility from one track to the next (Gamoran, 1987; Hallinan & Ellison, 2007).

The roots of my research question reside in my 12-year career as a high school educator, where I taught both mainstream and advanced track classes. I have also spent four years as a teacher educator and researcher, where I have examined the debilitating effects of tracking. Wanting to ensure that all children have the tools to access and achieve their future aspirations, I am dedicated to highlighting educational policy that inhibits student success by using empirical research. Florida’s role in this research is also important. When highlighting the historical struggles students of color have faced in the United States, much of the conversation involves events and legislature enacted by states such as Mississippi and Alabama, along with other Southern states. While Florida is geographically a part of the Southern region of the U.S., there exists a widely adopted perception that it is not a part of the traditional South and does not have a historically racist history. Florida is an important research location because in order to understand the pervasive nature of racist policy and ideology, we must acknowledge that lawmakers and citizens in nearly every segment of the country held these mindsets. Indeed, racism is not a Mississippi or Alabama or Georgia problem. It is widespread and has deep historical roots.

**Organization of the Study**

This chapter serves as a brief overview of the dissertation research study and the components of the research process employed. What follows in Chapter 2 is a review of relevant literature on tracking, magnet schools, and within-school segregation in American public schools as researched by educational historians, sociologists, and
anthropologists. Chapter 3 describes the context of the study along with the methods and methodology used to answer the research question. In Chapter 4, I present the results of the case study by using the words of the participants as they were told to me. In Chapter 5, I articulate the major themes that emerged from the participants' words in the previous chapter, and in Chapter 6, I explore how and why this investigation confirms and deviates from closely related research.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introductory Remarks

The purpose of this research study is to examine how Black students in a mainstream language arts classroom at a magnet high school talk about their career aspirations. To situate this study within the scholarly literature, I will explore accounts of tracking in American education as researched by historians of education. Tracking, for the purposes of this study, is defined as a form of curricular differentiation where schools organize students for instruction by their abilities into one of several academic paths. Then, I will examine modern manifestations of tracking in American public schools beginning in the 20th century. Within the discussion of modern tracking, I will explore Florida’s use of tracking through magnet schools in order to circumvent federal legislation aimed at desegregating American public schools. Next, I will review the literature claiming that tracking stratifies learning opportunities for all students in the school system. Afterward, I will synthesize works from scholars who found that tracking fosters within-school segregation and consequently forms students’ career aspirations. Overall, the intersection of these bodies of literature will serve as the foundation for this study.

History of Tracking

Through written and oral accounts, historians of education have illustrated how educational tracks have disadvantaged minoritized populations, altering their career aspirations and academic achievement since Spanish and British colonists created formal schools in the New World. Rury (2012) claims the possibilities of addressing tough questions about America’s past is important, especially when attempting to
understand fairness in educational access. Curiosity about topics such as educational equity and historical influences on current dilemmas in education, such as tracking, are cornerstones in presenting scholarship in the history of education (Rury, 2012).

Historians, such as James Anderson, Zoe Burkholder, and Scott Baker, have researched the intersection of racial segregation, tracking, and career aspirations in American schooling. While their larger works and research questions do not directly focus on these three topics, the connection of these fields of inquiry serves as key discussion points and evidence in supporting their overarching theses. In examining historical accounts of tracking in the American school system, I take a chronological journey through the works of three historians of education. I begin with Anderson’s (1988) illustration of tracking at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) after the American Civil War, followed by Burkholder’s (2011) discussion of academic tracks during the Cold War era, before finishing with Baker’s (2001) examination of the American Civil Rights period and how tracking was used to shape the college and university options students of color had upon completing high school.

**Tracking in the South During Reconstruction**

Perhaps the earliest form of academic tracking in American public schools occurred in the South following the Civil War. Anderson (1988), in *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*, argues that Northern White philanthropists, in conjunction with Southern plantation owners and even prominent African American figures, were the primary decision makers in the academic tracks available to Southern Blacks (Anderson, 1988). The two dominant educational pathways offered to Black students in primary, secondary, and higher education included a curricular model that promoted a classical, liberal arts curriculum and one that promoted an industrial
education, instilling values such as steady work habits, practical knowledge, and Christian morals, better known as the Hampton-Tuskegee Model. Each of the models was backed by prominent African American leaders, for conflicting reasons. Booker T. Washington promoted the industrial model of education, claiming the only jobs available for Southern Blacks were those requiring manual labor. Washington argued that an education focusing on arts and sciences would do nothing to ensure citizenship and even procure employment in a deeply racist society (Washington, 1969). W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) disagreed with Washington’s ideas for education, claiming industrial education accepts the socially constructed inferiority of Black Americans and promotes a continuation of the racial caste system, stunting the ambitions of Black youth wishing to pursue a variety of careers.

The influence of Northern missionary and industrial philanthropists was extremely powerful, since their donations dictated which schools would remain open. While missionary philanthropists sought to support institutions that taught a classical, liberal arts curriculum, industrial philanthropists donated to institutions that implemented the Hampton-Tuskegee model of industrial education. Each of the academic tracks promoted drastically different student outcomes. One prepared students for employment in white-collar professions and societal leadership roles, while the Hampton-Tuskegee model prepared students for subservient jobs in blue-collar professions. Anderson (1988) argues that funds from White philanthropists only sought to ensure stability in the American caste system. He contends that education for democratic citizenship and for second-class citizenship are not mutually exclusive concepts. Rather, the two are “fundamental American conceptions of society and progress” used to maintain
established racial power structures (Anderson, 1988, p. 1). Such structures were essential to keep Southern Blacks working for lower wages, producing the commodities manufactured in Northern factories.

Anderson (1988) reveals the transformative and destructive power of the philanthropic funds, especially with regards to the academic tracks that were available to Southern Blacks. For instance, Fort Valley High in Georgia, which originally followed a liberal arts curriculum, in a desperate effort to remain open, needed funds from outside sources. However, industrial philanthropists only donated to schools that followed the Hampton-Tuskegee model. As a result, Fort Valley High changed its mission in order to survive, limiting its students to a curriculum that promoted manual labor and steady work habits.

During the period following the Civil War, schools that endorsed a liberal arts track were few in number, mostly due to the lack of financial resources and donors. Anderson (1988) points to the modest influence that missionary philanthropists held by virtue of the scant presence of such schools. As supporters of classic, liberal arts education, missionary philanthropists generally had less money and struggled to fund schools. Schools that promoted the liberal arts curriculum eventually changed their philosophy as funds from missionary philanthropists dried up and industrial philanthropists gained control.

Both missionary and industrial philanthropists shared the assumption that African Americans held education to high regard, and that, if educated, they could alter the political landscape in the United States. This supposition caused industrialists to take action, including organizing efforts to out fund and eliminate missionary philanthropic
movements, limiting African Americans’ access to a liberal arts track, which could have prepared them for jobs in the business and law sectors.

**Tracking During the Cold War**

With the backdrop of national security and racial equality between 1945-1970, American schools underwent many changes. Divergent tracks preparing students for careers in different fields, however, remained a staple of American public schools. As was true in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, race remained central to the discussion of which academic track students would take in the middle of the 20th century. Burkholder (2011) examined educational discourse on race and how it was dominated by White “social scientists, professional educators, and teachers with the power to influence how schools mark particular ideas about race as defining characteristics of an educated citizenry” (p. 14). While Black educators actively sought to alter how schools taught about race, their continued relegation as second-class citizens limited the reach of their voice. Burkholder (2011) illustrates how schools, especially during the mid-20th century, have been the institutions that created and conveyed the concept of race and the locations where perceptions of race evolved through means such as tracking.

Considering the intersection of racial segregation, tracking, and student career aspirations, we see lasting legacies from the mid-20th century. One major legacy is the use of standardized testing to measure student aptitude and career interests, among other things. Results from various standardized measurements have been used to shape future opportunities available to students. Burkholder (2011) suggests that school administrators and policymakers relied heavily on standardized testing measures to stabilize an Anglo-dominated, racially segregated society. Perhaps some of the first standardized tests implemented in the American public school system were IQ tests
designed to track students in the 1920s, providing what educators though would be a "more efficient way of personalizing instruction" for all students (Fass, 1980, p. 450). As the first tests used to sort students by ability in American public schools, IQ tests were originally created in France as a way to assess developmental disabilities in young children (Au, 2013). IQ tests became widely adopted in schools across the country as a tool to "determine which curricula was best for students" (Burkholder, 2011, p. 84). The inherently flawed nature of the manner in which these tests were used was clear to scholars like Margaret Mead, who fought against the use of measures used to divide students along racial lines (Burkholder, 2011). Mead advocated for an educational environment that "reduce[d] any tendency to lump people together" based on racial, ethnic, or religious backgrounds" (Burkholder, 2011, p. 92). Opposing Mead’s notions, the practice of placing students based on test scores continued into the American Civil Rights period, where Baker (2001) explicitly points to the use of standardized measures as a means to alter the academic tracks and consequential career aspirations of students.

Tracking as a Means to Alter Students’ Career Aspirations

Identifying racial divisions, Baker (2001) claims the creation of standardized tests deliberately restricted career aspirations and access to educational institutions for African Americans (p. 329). In “Paradoxes of Desegregation,” Baker (2001) examined the relationship between standardized testing and desegregation movements following the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in Brown v. Board of Education that legally mandated racial segregation was unconstitutional. In perhaps the most explicit display of the negative nature of the intersection of tracking, racial segregation, and career aspirations in the history of formal American schooling, many traditionally segregated
Southern colleges and universities publicly fought to deny Black applicants access to their institutions. According to Baker (2001), Southern universities, including, but not limited to, the University of Florida (UF), the University of Georgia (UGA), and Louisiana State University (LSU) began regulating admissions in the 1950s in order to combat a growing African American desire to attend historically segregated institutions. Tactics used to regulate enrollment included requiring applicants to submit test scores for admissions (Baker, 2001). In an extreme example, by 1952, the UGA College of Law required applicants to submit scores from three separate exams.

Before 1958, the State of Florida prohibited African Americans from being admitted to its public state universities. Governor Leroy Collins appointed a committee to research ways to maintain segregation in the state’s historically White institutions. Collins’s tactics were prompted by a lawsuit filed by Virgil Hawkins, a Black graduate of Florida A&M University (FAMU) in Tallahassee, seeking admissions to the UF College of Law. In 1949, Hawkins, along with five other Black students applied to UF. All of the applications submitted by prospective Black students were rejected and forwarded to FAMU, one of Florida’s HBCUs. For nine years, Hawkins fought for entry into the UF College of Law, which was the only law school supported by the state at the time. He appealed UF’s rejection to the Florida Supreme Court under the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, since there were no other options for African Americans seeking a degree in law in Florida. In perhaps the “most extreme example of entrenched obstructionism in defending Jim Crow racism in law school admissions” (Kiddler, 2003, p. 5), the court ruled against Hawkins and required a law school be built at FAMU for Black applicants only (Wallenstein, 1999). In 1956, two years after Brown
v. Board of Education, Hawkins appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled that UF must admit Hawkins to its law school. However, the Florida Supreme Court refused to extend an offer to Hawkins. After three more appeals to the U.S. Supreme Court, in June 1958, federal judges issued an injunction prohibiting UF from limiting its graduate and professional schools from prohibiting admissions to anyone based on race. Throughout the ongoing hearings, UF raised its entry requirements to its law school, and Hawkins, who possessed the academic requirements needed when he first applied did not meet the new requirements and was never admitted to the school (Taylor, 2002).

The only in-state colleges for Black students before 1958 in Florida were Bethune Cookman University in Daytona Beach and FAMU. At this time, Bethune Cookman offered no graduate degree programs, and FAMU offered limited choices in graduate programs. Students at Florida’s historically White colleges enjoyed a diverse curriculum, while Black students experienced limited curricular and academic concentrations in Florida’s HBCUs. Battling a growing number of Black applicants for law and other professional graduate programs, many universities made compulsory the passing of the bar exam and the National Teachers Examination for interested applicants. Botching the appropriate metaphor for the adopted law school examination, the Speaker of the South Carolina General Assembly described the purpose of this exam as one “to bar Negroes and some undesirable Whites” (Baker, 2001, p. 331). Much to the chagrin of the federal government, which sought to quell any semblance of domestic discord, unequal access for White and Black applicants to publicly funded
colleges and universities gained national attention through high-profile court cases and daily reports delivered on an emergent television news market (Baker, 2001).

Countering a federal push to force state universities to admit African Americans, some states followed Alabama’s example and created funds to send African American applicants to HBCUs like Howard University in Washington, D.C., while denying them admission to the all-White University of Alabama. Other states went so far as to create specialized schools within existing universities to redirect qualified African American applicants. In Louisiana and Florida, African Americans wishing to pursue a law degree were not admitted to LSU or UF, each state’s flagship university, but were instead sent to the Southern University Law Center or FAMU (Baker, 2001).

**Tracking in Urban Schools**

While Southern schools in the late 19th century used academic tracks to keep newly-freed Black Americans locked at the bottom of the social hierarchy, at the turn of the 20th century in the northeastern U.S., tracking was used as a reaction to an influx of European immigrant students into American urban schools (Loveless, 1988). In 1909, famed education scholar Ellwood Cubberley stated that in order for public schools to maintain a democratic function, changes would have to occur in order to assimilate children of European immigrants, thus the implementation of tracks, where children were sorted by academic ability (Hallinan, 2004). These tracks set a precedent of organizing children by intelligence, using IQ tests and standardized exams to categorize students into appropriate classes. By 1950, many American high schools implemented some form of tracking for their students based on results from IQ tests (Burkholder, 2011; Fass, 1980; Sexton, 1961). Examples of early tracks included programs to prepare students for the blue-collar workforce and programs to prepare others for higher
education and white-collar jobs (Anderson, 1988; Angus, Mirel, & Vinovskis, 1988; Loveless, 1988; Reese, 2011). Some vocational tracks were designed to groom future plumbers, secretaries, hairdressers, welders, and many other occupations. Others were most often of a college preparatory nature for the children from wealthy families.

The most common present day manifestation of tracking by ability in schools involves sorting students into one of three sections (basic, regular, or advanced) for each of the four core academic disciplines (mathematics, science, social studies, and language arts). Access and mobility from one level to the next is ostensibly flexible. The reality is, historically, rates of movement from one level to the next have remained stagnant, especially with students from poverty and students of color (Hallinan, 2004). Hallinan and Ellison (2007) found that any instances of mobility from one track to another is generally attributed to students moving from higher to lower tracks. In fact, as schools become more racially diverse, we witness a “heightened use of academic tracking whereby minority students often end up in the lowest track” (Davis, 2014, p. 404). These divergent tracks, often found in magnet schools, create schools within schools, where students are homogeneously grouped and have limited contact with students from other groups, obstructing the creation of diverse learning environments.

**The Rise of Magnet Schools**

The emergence of magnet schools coincided with the U.S. Supreme Court’s call for mandatory desegregation of schools and neighborhoods through the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Magnet schools were extremely popular in states that took a “wait-and-see” approach to desegregation following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (Martinelli, 2015, p. 13). In many southern states, including Florida, little desegregation occurred between 1954-1970, therefore, when the federal
government issued mandatory, immediate integration measures, such states scrambled to fulfill the required guidelines for desegregation. In order to entice White students to high minority schools, some school districts offered prestigious academic magnet programs at high minority schools, such as the Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB). Through their uncanny ability to attract White students to historically Black public schools, advanced academic tracks offered at magnet schools became a “hallmark” in voluntary desegregation in the South (Martinelli, 2015, p. 19). Proponents of magnet schools claimed that attractive curricular offerings at high minority schools addresses the issue of racial segregation while improving academic outcomes for historically disadvantaged student populations. In contrast, opponents exhibited how magnet schools stratify students along color, socio-economic, and curricular lines, since not all students have access to each track within any given school (Garner, 2005).

In a historical examination of the desegregation of a public high school in Prairieville, the city where this study takes place, Garner (2005) points to the magnet school model as a way to entice White parents to enroll their children in schools with predominantly Black student populations. Prairieville’s Washington High School (WHS) opened its doors in 1970, replacing a recently closed “All-Negro” secondary school as part of the local school board’s attempts to adhere to a federal mandate to desegregate immediately. Located in a majority African American neighborhood, WHS suffered from limited financial support and facility management from the local district, which diverted much of its monies to its historically White schools in the west section of town. Such inequalities prompted the school board to propose options to effectively integrate the
student population at WHS (Garner, 2005). The mostly White neighborhoods in town rejected proposals for mandatory bussing and rezoning of school attendance zones by filing lawsuits and threatening to pull their children from the public school system. In response, the school board looked to creating a “magnet” program at WHS. Its members felt that “if students were offered an educational opportunity that was unavailable elsewhere in the district, then perhaps their parents would resist less to having them bused across town” (Garner, 2005, p. 255). As a result, WHS became home to the state’s first IB program.

The magnet school model, which continued to be embraced by many Southern states, offered a specialized curriculum. Many Southern districts placed magnet programs in schools with majority-African American populations, skirting the issue of de facto segregation. As Garner (2005) noted, “a school desegregated on paper is not necessarily integrated on its campus” (p. 264). Indeed, residential segregation, historically and currently, remains an issue for Prairieville, but the IB magnet continues to fulfill the technical federal requirements of desegregation. Critics of the magnet model claim that the magnet school does nothing to address inequities. Instead, it acts as a “school that has been made so attractive educationally (magnetized) you will want to enroll your child voluntarily in spite of the fact that he will have to go to school with Blacks” (Foster, 1973, p. 24). Within WHS, the magnet program did not act as a part of the school as much as it fostered an atmosphere where the IB magnet existed apart from the mainstream student population. The IB Program fostered within school segregation, where the IB students, who were mostly white, attended their advanced
level classes, while the “neighborhood” students, who were mostly Black, were relegated to mainstream level courses (Garner, 2005).

Summary points. Some of the earliest documented accounts of tracking in U.S. public schools occurred in the Post Civil War South, where wealthy landowners, northern philanthropists, and African American leaders debated which academic tracks should be made available for newly-freed Southern Blacks. This debate continued through the Cold War and into the Civil Rights period, using tools such as standardized test scores to separate students and consequently maintain historical racial segregation. Following the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1954 decision in Brown v. Board of Education declaring racial segregation within schools unconstitutional, many state and local governments took a wait and see approach, delaying desegregation measures until federal intervention. Due to limited federal involvement in measures to ensure public schools were open to students of all races, little desegregation occurred in public schools in the South until President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, calling for the mandatory desegregation of all U.S. public schools. As a result of federal enforcement of school desegregation measures, state and local lawmakers searched for other means to legally divide schools based on race. Magnet schools boasting exclusive academic programs appeared in many Southern schools with majority-African American populations in order to attract White students and technically fulfill federal desegregation requirements.

While successful at meeting federal requirements of racial desegregation at the school level, magnet programs fostered racial segregation across academic tracks at the class level within the schools. Historically, tracking has assigned learning
opportunities disproportionately, spawning separate lines of inquiry attempting to address the differences between opportunities available for students across tracks. One major area of examination explored by researchers is the ways in which future prospects, such as career choice and the desire to enroll in an institution of higher learning, differ for students across academic tracks within a magnet school.

**Stratifying Learning Opportunities**

With a historical foundation of the uses of tracking in American public schools, we now examine the problems associated with tracking in schools. In larger comprehensive high schools, curricular differentiation is needed to help teachers organize instruction for different groups of students. Attending college is not the desire for every student in high school. Therefore, college preparatory tracks may be inappropriate for students needing a high school diploma in order to enter a trade of their choice. As such, the practice of sorting students into different tracks is not inherently unjust. The methods used to measure intelligence and sort students into different curricular tracks, however, are flawed and reproduce existing racial and socioeconomic inequalities (Au, 2013). Results from standardized intelligence measures, such as IQ and Stanford-Binet intelligent tests often decide students’ academic track, allowing them and their families little say in their appropriate or desired academic programs. Au (2013) argues that the use of standardized testing fulfills the roles of “both legitimating and masking structural race and class inequalities” (p. 16). Indeed, school leaders have used scientific measures to legitimize and duplicate the persistent inequalities of the outside world within schools.

Educational attainment has become synonymous with prestige and status in the U.S., and tracking systems in American public schools have historically decided who is
afforded the opportunity to benefit from the rank associated with higher education (Clark, 1961). There is a robust body of scholarship linking tracking and student academic prospects. From studies that acknowledge tracking’s ability to stratify learning opportunities for students in upper and lower tracks (Oakes, 2005; Gamoran, 1987; Rosenbaum, 1975; Lucas & Berends, 2007; Haller, 1985) to ethnographic studies that describe the manner in which tracking practices disadvantage children of color (Vaught, 2011), much of the research on tracking points to the harmful nature of grouping students by ability.

The most common academic track programs in modern American high schools are college preparatory, vocational, and general. As college attendance is not compulsory, the college preparatory track may not be appropriate for all students. Students hoping to learn a trade and enter the workforce immediately after high school have historically had the option to enter the vocational track in order to focus on perfecting a range of vocations. According to Sexton (1961), students and parents should have the final say concerning which academic track is the most appropriate. In practice, however, teachers and administrators typically make these decisions with “firm and directive” hands (p. 158). Low-income parents and immigrant families are less likely to question the school’s decisions regarding the education of their children (Ogbu, 1987; Sexton, 1961). As a result, as more and more vocations move toward requiring a college degree for employees, students occupying vocational and general education tracks in American high schools become further marginalized through their increased difficulties in finding employment (Goodlad, 1984). Indeed, there are marked differences
between the academic tracks in American high schools, and the different tracks direct the career opportunities of the students within them.

Rosenbaum (1975), in a study of a racially homogeneous school with a stratified track system, suggests that lower tracks usually offer a more narrow range of course options and an even narrower variety of post-graduation options than advanced track programs. The availability of such opportunities translated into a marked dispersion of IQ scores between students in the different tracks (Rosenbaum, 1975). Adding to variability in IQ scores across tracks, scholars have also noted that many teachers in lower tracks set lower expectations for their students (Haller, 1985; Goodlad, 1984; Oakes, 2005; Rosenbaum, 1975), subscribing to the assumption that students from high poverty backgrounds do not possess lofty post secondary aspirations. As such, Rosenbaum (1975) noted a positive correlation between IQ scores and a student’s academic track, while Haller (1985) found that the lower tracks are generally reserved for students from poverty. Gamoran (1987), in an attempt to “uncover the mechanisms through with stratification in schools differentiates student achievement,” also explains how students within the upper tracks are generally a “more affluent clientele” (p. 135) and are the sole beneficiaries of tracking.

Gorski (2013) furthers Rosenbaum’s (1975), Haller’s (1985), and Gamoran’s (1987) arguments, focusing on the interaction between socioeconomic status and race, claiming that “poverty does not happen in a vacuum” (p. 44) but is rather a symptom of racial identity. According to a study conducted by Taylor, Kochhar, Fry, Velasco, and Motel (2011), “median wealth in White households is 20 times that of Black households and 18 times that of Hispanic households” (p. 1). Indeed, non-White households are far
more likely to live below the poverty line than White households. Goodlad (1984), Lucas and Berends (2007) and Oakes (2005) furthered this claim, noting that race plays a dominant role in track placement. In their separate studies, they found, regardless of socioeconomic status, White and Asian students were more likely to be placed in upper track courses, while Black and Latino students were more likely to be placed in lower track courses. In their study investigating whether overall racial/ethnic student populations among schools mirrored that of the different tracks within the individual schools, Lucas and Berends (2007) found “the more racially diverse the school, the better Whites’ chances and the worse Blacks’ chances of college prep course-taking” (p. 169). The college-preparatory nature of many upper tracks remains a coveted benefit, an advantage students in other tracks are not afforded (Gamoran, 1987). Indeed, being a part of the upper tracks can positively alter the non-academic present and future outcomes for students.

Perhaps the most notable scholar researching tracking is Jeannie Oakes. In her book, *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*, Oakes (2005) sought to characterize the differences in educational experiences of students in 297 classrooms in 25 middle and high schools. Her research did not set out to illustrate the distinctions between the schools; in fact, Oakes (2005) attempted to demonstrate the drastic differences in student experience within the schools and how these experiences subvert what she calls the “American notion of equality” (p. 4).

Oakes (2005) used the data compiled by Goodlad, former dean of the Graduate School of Education at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), and his research team in the 1970s. Goodlad’s team sought to answer the broad wondering—
What happens in American schools? Much of the data Goodlad and his team gathered were addressed by Oakes’s (2005) study. Among the findings, Oakes (2005) discovered that “low-track courses offered less demanding topics and skills, while high-track classes typically included more complex material and more thinking and problem-solving tasks” (p. 226). The study also showed that tracking cultivated low self-esteem and led to more dropouts, while negatively affecting future aspirations of students in the low tracks.

Indeed, track systems have a propensity to shape the future aspirations of students, as the ability group to which students are assigned dictates the amount and types of courses students take (Oakes, 2005). Tracking becomes an issue of equity and social justice when we consider that low-income African American and Latino students are far more likely to be enrolled in low-track classes than their White and Asian classmates (Oakes, 2005). In the school systems Oakes (2005) studied, she found that when White, Asian, and Latino students had the same standardized scores, 93% of Whites, 97% of Asians, and only 56% of Latino students were enrolled in high-track classes. Furthermore, considering all students who scored in the 90th percentile on national math and reading achievement exams, 85% of White students were enrolled in high-track classes, while only 63% of students of color were enrolled in those same courses (Oakes, 2005).

These statistics are sobering, especially when considering the benefits high-track classes offer. Advantages include access to more resources and classroom environments designed for collaboration and student interaction (Oakes, 2005). Another enticing privilege of high-track courses is the extra grade points students have the
opportunity to earn, which can strengthen their grade point averages, making them appear more appealing to colleges and universities (Oakes, 2005). Certain courses also allow students the prospect of earning college credits in their high school courses. One major difference between high track and low track classes is the expertise and dedication of the classroom teacher. According to Oakes’s (2005) study, many teachers do not see low track classes as desirable. In fact, within schools, teachers may “jockey among themselves for high-track assignments,” or campus administrators may reserve assignments of certain courses as either rewards or punishments for teachers (Oakes, 2005, p. 227). Teachers of high track classes usually “put more time and energy into their teaching” (Gamoran & Berends, 1987, p. 424). Teachers also play a significant role in the polarization of students across tracks. Gamoran and Berends (1987) found teachers viewed high track students more positively and low track students as “inferior” (p. 427). In many cases, this leaves low-track students with the least prepared, least invested teachers. In her 25-school study, Oakes (2005) found that many of the teachers in low track classes placed less emphasis on learning goals and spent more time on “routines, seatwork, and worksheet activities” (p. 227) instead of engaging students with concepts and promoting collaboration and problem solving skills.

Despite rhetoric to the contrary, schools are notorious for reproducing inequality and maintaining the social stratification ubiquitous in society (Apple, 2012; Grant, 1988; MacLeod, 2009). According to Grant (1988), schools have “never provided equality of opportunity” mainly because they have mirrored the inherently unequal, hierarchical structures of the outside world (p. 218). These hierarchical classifications continue to create associations between student success in school and the way they and others
perceive and identify their abilities (Oakes, 2005). For instance, many view students in advanced track courses as advanced people, while students in remedial courses are stigmatized with the label “struggling learner,” generating a tiered system outside the walls of the school based on the practice of tracking within the school. Over time, students begin to adopt these identifiers as their personal identities. As a result, through the hierarchical casting of tracking, schools dictate the career aspirations of their students (Oakes, 2005).

Critical ethnography and tracking. Vaught (2011), in a critical ethnography entitled *Racism, Public Schooling, and the Entrenchment of White Supremacy* employed Critical Race Theory (CRT) to explain the effects of tracking on minority students. The goal of CRT is to “reframe the sometimes-dichotomous scholarly discourse around structural power,” centering race and racism as the theoretical framework (Vaught, 2011, p. 14).

Using interview data from students, teachers, principals, union representatives, school board members, central office personnel, and the superintendent of the school district where she conducted her research, Vaught (2011) explored “how the racialized achievement gap is produced and reproduced” in an urban school district. As part of the evidence to address the reproduction of racism within the public schools, Vaught (2011) points to the intersection of racial segregation, tracking, and career aspirations of students within the school district and how the system has historically used tracking as a tool to subjugate Black students into lower track classes, consequently limiting their career aspirations.
Advanced track academics allow for higher academic achievement for students and greater opportunities for acceptance to prestigious colleges and universities. CRT argues that these opportunities for achievement and acceptance are restricted mainly to White students (Vaught, 2011). Applying Vaught’s theory of restrictive education, it is evident that no policy is in place to ensure that each academic track is equally accessible to all students. Vaught (2011) explains the ironically restrictive and deeply racist concept of tracking through her discussions with Mae Collins, the Chief Academic Officer of the school district in which Vaught conducted her study. Collins opposed tracking because it “guaranteed an unequally large distribution of resources to White and ideologically, culturally, and structurally Whitened students” (p. 116).

In 1983, Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk*, a damning report that professed that American public schools were failing. This publication spawned numerous reform efforts in order to address shortcomings as illustrated by the report. With *A Nation at Risk’s* emphasis on college preparedness, schools have placed a focus on achievement in advanced measures such as test scores from programs such as AP and IB. The regard paid to such measures detracts from providing a quality education for all students, not just those in advanced tracks. Collins added to her list of arguments against tracking, stating that it not only extends the privileges to “already privileged White children,” but it promotes a disregard for the “existing disparities” in educational opportunity (Vaught, 2011, p. 116). Applying the principles of CRT, it can be affirmed that efforts to level the proverbial playing field for all students are futile. The hegemonic nature of the American schooling system, under its current and past policies, will continue to “[leverage] the
power of a collective, dominant Whiteness” (Vaught, 2001, p. 149). In this case, even as more Black students achieve access to advanced track programs, and even as more Black students gain admittance to colleges and universities, the “playing field” does not consequently become level. Instead, more and more White students apply and gain admittance to more selective Research I and private universities (Vaught, 2011). The racist nature of educational access merely becomes displaced, while continuing to flourish.

The mere definition of tracking involves classifying students. While some of the primary uses of tracking were to assimilate immigrant children and promote industrial education, the present-day form of tracking appears to resemble racial segregation in many schools across the country. Vaught (2011) explains the conundrum using the reasoning of anthropologist John Ogbu. Ogbu (1987) claimed that frequently, many White people believe that schools and programs are required to function as equal opportunity institutions. Because of this, the inability of Black students to achieve within schools must stem from flaws within the students and their families. For instance, Ogbu (1987) argues that if students are members of a collective group facing academic difficulties, there must be deficiencies in the culture harming the success of the children within the group. If this is the case, then it follows that the schools must protect the students from their own culture. Instead of taking into account the policies that hinder, and in many places, prohibit access to enriching academic programs, Ogbu (1987) and Vaught (2011) hold that many schools prefer to place the blame on the families and children who do not possess the cultural capital to effectively compete in a hegemonic society.
Summary points. Conceived as a mechanism to make the delivery of instruction to an array of learners and learning styles more efficient for teachers, tracking has ironically succeeded only in “intensifying distinctions among social classes” and underscoring social and economic class distinctions (Clark, 1961, p. viii; Oakes, 2005). Researchers have attempted to articulate how tracking assigns learning opportunities disproportionately. Students in lower tracks generally have a narrow range of course options and often experience lower expectations from their teachers, while students in higher tracks usually experience classroom instruction designed for high interaction and collaboration (Haller, 1985; Oakes, 2005; Rosenbaum, 1975). Aside from advantages inside of the classroom, upper track courses afford students the opportunity for extra points on their grade point average and the ability to earn college course credits while in high school. Tracking becomes a social justice concern when we recognize that African American and Latino students are more likely than their White and Asian peers to be enrolled in low-track classes (Gamoran, 1987). Recognizing the disparities in track placement across races, we must examine the relationships between students’ track placement in high school and their future aspirations.

Tracking Future Aspirations

Researchers have explored tracking’s effects on non-academic outcomes, such as student self-concept and their future aspirations (Eder, 1983; Goodlad, 1984; Marsh, 1984; Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Howard, 2003; Chavous, et al., 2003). Students in upper tracks commonly have more ambitious future aspirations and self-concepts about their abilities than their peers in the lower tracks (Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Oakes, 2005). Sexton (1961) argues that placing students in groups such as college preparatory, vocational, and general has the potential to “determine [their] entire future life” (p. 152).
For instance, a student placed in a vocational or general track has greater difficulty gaining admittance to and graduating from college, limiting that same student’s chances of earning a professional or highly skilled job (Sexton, 1961). Hallinan and Ellison (2007) argue that the lower curricular tracks generally “provide fewer opportunities [for students in those courses] to learn” (p. 101). The cumulative effect of disadvantaging students in these tracks is lower educational and occupational attainment (Hallinan & Ellison, 2007; Rosenbaum, 1976). Invaluable information, such as the college application process and the completion of college admissions essays are usually reserved for students in the college preparatory tracks (Goodlad, 1984). In fact, Goodlad’s (1984) research found that high track classes are markedly distinguishable from other courses and tracks by “a significantly greater orientation toward college preparatory topics” (p. 153).

Spring (2016) argues that, through tracking, schools play a role in economic segregation, social reproduction and maintaining social class distinctions. He refers to tracking as a method schools use to separate students along household income lines, where the “higher the family income of the students, the more likely it is that they will be in the higher ability groups or a college-preparatory curriculum” (p. 84). Spring (2016) also asserts the converse argument, where “the lower the family income of the students, the more likely it is that they will be in the lower ability groups or the vocational curriculum” (p. 84). While Spring (2016) critiques tracking’s role in segregating students within schools, Bowles & Gintis (1976) examines the role of tracking across multiple schools. Indeed, social reproduction also occurs across schools within larger districts. The type of schools available to students from different economic backgrounds informs
the type of curriculum the students receive. Bowles & Gintis (1976) claim that schools with a majority of students from low income homes tend to be authoritarian in nature, demanding conformity and uniformity in their students, preparing them for subservient, often low-paying careers. Meanwhile, students from high-income neighborhoods usually have access to educationally innovative schools that promote independent thinking and problem solving skills (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Oakes, 2005).

Marsh (1984), in a study comparing self-concept of 305 students among different academic tracks, explains that a student’s academic self-concept is dependent upon the track in which the student is placed. Marsh (1984) found that tracking could have “substantial effects” on the academic identities of students within different ability groups (p. 804). Howard (2003) and Chavous, et al. (2003), in separate studies on how Black students viewed their racial identity and career aspirations, further Marsh’s (1984) finding, claiming student self-concept and the teachers’ concepts of students both play major roles in the career aspirations of students.

Howard (2003) sought to explicitly address the question of how Black students viewed their college ambitions and the manner in which the same students constructed their academic identities. He asked his research participants, 20 African American high school students at two separate urban schools, about their “perceptions of schooling as they relate to their academic performance, the influences on the formation of their academic identities, and the limitations of shaping positive identities” (p. 5). Howard (2003) selected his participants from two predominantly African American schools from two different communities in the same larger city. He conducted semi-structured interviews with participants from both AP classes and lower-track classes, discovering
that parents and schools both played major roles in the career aspirations of the participants. His findings point to the dim reality that “schools have become sites of resistance, alienation, silence, and ultimately failure” for Black students (p. 5). Several of the participants echoed that even though they were strong students in their middle schools, they felt the teachers in their high schools saw them as inferior because of their race and placement in lower track classes. Additionally, several of the participants stated that their parents told them that they would have to be “extra good at what [they] do” in order to succeed in a system that placed little value in Black students in lower track classes (Howard, 2003, p. 13).

Other studies corroborate Howard’s (2003) findings. For instance, Chavous, et al. (2003) asked how student racial identity correlates to their educational outcomes. Their study, stemming from research conducted by sociologists and health professionals, combines quantitative and qualitative data, with a focus on quantitative variables. They conducted a longitudinal mixed-methods study using a sample of 606 African American youth. Data included individual interviews and school district records. The three measures the researchers extracted from the data were racial identity, educational beliefs (how important they viewed schooling as measured on a Likert scale), and school outcomes (GPA, college enrollment). The authors claim that Black youths’ racial identity leads to different pathways of educational attainment. Youth who perceive positive societal views about their racial group are more strongly attached to their educational environment and possess more lofty future aspirations than those who hold negative concepts of their racial group (Chavous, et al., 2003, p. 1086). For instance, the participants who had optimistic beliefs about society's views of African Americans
had higher rates of high school attendance, high school completion, and college attendance than those who felt negatively about their racial group (Chavous, et al., 2003, p. 1086).

In *Expanding College Access for Urban Youth: What Schools and Colleges Can Do* (2016), Howard, et al. edited a timely and important examination of the historical and persistent inequities students of color face in their attempts to access higher education. Their scholarly work challenges the widely adopted mindset that access to enriching educational programs is open to all students. This research places emphasis on Black and Latino communities given their status as the two largest non-White groups in the U.S. and the educational disparities that disproportionately affect them. Blacks and Latinos, in comparison to their White and Asian American peers, are less likely to complete high school, enroll in and complete college (Howard, 2010). Howard, et al. (2010) combine forces with emerging scholars with close ties to school-university partnerships in order to address one major research question: “What roles have public institutions (namely pre-K-12 and postsecondary) played in helping to ameliorate the chronic underperformance that have been a staple in many low-income, urban communities?” (p. 3). To answer the question, the authors examined 10 years of data from a school-university partnership (Vice Provost Initiative for Pre-College Scholars, or VIPS) in order to address “the leaky parts of the educational pipeline in a manner that improves education prospects, life chances, and community vitality for underserved students” (Howard, et al., 2016, p. 3).

The authors mindfully dismiss the idea that socioeconomic status is the sole sociological issue concerning educational equity. They cite research pointing to poverty
as one of the most pressing factors in chronic educational underachievement (Ekono, Yang, & Smith, 2016) and carefully weave contemporary research revealing the “disturbing” intersection of race and poverty (Anyon, 2014; Cass, 2010; Gorski, 2013) throughout the narrative. Indeed, they point to the reality that African American, Latino, Native American, and Southeast Asian families disproportionately fall below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014), tying issues of economic status to issues of race and ethnicity.

The authors point to major issues with lower academic tracks, such as diminished expectations of students by the mostly White, monolingual, middle-class teaching force (Delpit, 2006) and the lack of human and social capital regarding access to college counselors and experts to guide them through the enrollment process (Hearn, 1991; Kim & Schneider, 2005; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006). In fact, the authors cite research conducted by McDonough (1997), who found that students of color are more prone to see their assigned counselors as “impediments who prevent access to college preparatory courses and information” (p. 22). While this may be the case for many students of color, Ogbu (1987) questioned why some minoritized students have found success in navigating the educational system.

Ogbu’s (1987) microethnographic study sought to examine why some minoritized students have successfully crossed cultural boundaries and opportunity barriers to excel in school, while others continue to underperform. In order to answer his research questions, Ogbu (1987) examined different research approaches in educational anthropology, noting the unofficial beginning of ethnographic research studying minority education in the mid-1960s. During this time, research sought to “refute the notion that
minority and poor children were failing school because they were culturally deprived” (p. 312). Then, anthropologists sought to prove that academic difficulties for the same students were due to cultural discontinuities or culture conflicts. Ogbu (1987) felt that these two research approaches should be modified. This is when anthropological research developed into a stage dominated by microethnography and intervention ethnographic studies. The difference between the former and the latter studies is that the former are designed to explain why minority children succeed or fail in school, while the latter seek to discover “what works best for whom” for minority students and teachers of minority students (p. 314).

Ogbu (1987) notes that the main challenge for educational anthropology is “to explain the variability in school performance” (p. 316). In other words, why do some students of color succeed in the same system that many others fail? Many previous researchers claim that such failure in the school system was due to language deficiencies. Ogbu (1987) argues that the primary reason for discrepancies in school success for students of color is the “nature of the history, subordination, and exploitation of the minorities, and the nature of the minorities’ own instrumental and expressive responses to their treatment” (p. 317). To exemplify this argument, Ogbu (1987) lists factors that lead to issues for students of color regarding school performance. Primarily, society has denied students of color access to enriching educational programs, which has consequently led to a limitation in desirable job opportunities (Ogbu, 1987).

Ogbu (1987) defines the different types of minoritized populations he studied in order to further explain each group’s variability in school success. He refers to the different groups as autonomous minorities, immigrant minorities, and involuntary
minorities. According to Ogbu (1987), African Americans are classified as involuntary minorities because their migration to the U.S. through colonial manners such as slavery was not by personal choice. Such force has created a “deep distrust that runs through the relationship between public schools and involuntary minorities” (p. 326). Immigrant minorities differ in that they believe that the discrimination they experience is not permanent or institutionalized (p. 325).

Ogbu (1987) concluded the study with three main issues regarding minoritized children and their future aspirations. Conditions that can affect the future aspirations of children include whether the children are accustomed to seeing minoritized people experience unequal opportunity in a socially and economically rewarding way; whether or not there is a relationship between minoritized and dominant groups that fosters and environment where the dominant group seeks to substitute their cultural identity in the place of that of the minoritized groups; and whether or not the relationship between the schools and the minoritized groups is built on trust, encouraging minoritized students to accept school rules and practices in order to promote academic success (p. 334).

It is important to note that Ogbu’s research has received criticism over the years. In a study of the comprehensive works of Ogbu, Richard Valencia (2015) dedicated a section of his work on *Students of Color and the Achievement Gap* to addressing the points of Ogbu’s numerous critics. One area of criticism by eleven separate scholars is Ogbu’s deficit view of African American students’ educational attainment. Much of his research seeks to understand their “failure” as opposed to examining successes some African American students have enjoyed in public schools. At the center of his research, instead, is the mindset that African American students are “dysfunctional in the
schooling context” (Spencer, 2015, p. 49). This mindset, according to many researchers (Cousins, 2008; Foster, 2005; Perry, 2003; Spencer & Harpalani, 2008), is ahistorical, since African Americans have historically placed a premium on education and educational institutions and have been the fiercest proponents of public education in the history of American education.

**Summary points.** The literature exploring tracking’s effects on non-academic outcomes reveals that students’ track placement has a great effect on their academic self-concept and future aspirations (Howard, 2003; Howard, et al., 2016; Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Marsh, 1984; Oakes, 2005). Researchers argue that students in lower academic tracks in high school courses possess negative academic self-concepts and have fewer future aspirations than students in higher academic tracks (Chavous, et al, 2003; Howard, 2003). Howard, et al. (2016) argue that lower academic tracks are generally reserved for students of color and inhibit these same students’ access to higher education. Some students of color have experienced success accessing higher education from lower tracks, leading researchers such as Ogbu (1987) to examine the nuances between different types of minoritized populations in order to explain the variability in school success for these same students. Examining the career aspirations of students in lower tracks, researchers have noted the ubiquity of students of color in the lower tracks. Considering the historically racist nature of academic tracks and manners in which they stratify learning opportunities and access to higher education, in what ways do schools today resemble schools pre- *Brown v. Board of Education*? While segregation of students by race is no longer legal at the school level, does tracking foster racial segregation at the classroom level?
Within-School Segregation

Contemporary research on tracking points to a sociological phenomenon enabled by the practice of sorting students—within-school segregation (Conger, 2005, 2009; VanderHart, 2006; Davis, 2014; Oakes, 1995). Educational historians, anthropologists, and sociologists have shown that while schools have become more racially diverse over the years, we have also witnessed a “heightened use of academic tracking whereby minority students often end up in the lowest track” (Davis, 2014, p. 404). These divergent tracks create schools within schools, where students are homogeneously grouped and have limited contact with students from other groups (Sexton, 1961), fostering a cycle of “restricted opportunities and diminished outcomes” (Oakes, 1995, p. 681).

In a research article challenging historical methods of measuring racial isolation within schools, Conger (2009) rejected conventional school reports that list the total number of students within each selected demographic across the entire school. Instead, Conger’s (2009) “new direction in measuring racial isolation in schools” takes into account racial composition among classrooms (p. 307). Similarly, Davis (2014) warns against the notion of only examining the racial/ethnic composition of whole school populations. Instead, we must examine the racial/ethnic composition at the classroom level within academic tracks inside of the schools because many schools, such as magnet schools offering competitive academic programs, segregate their student bodies based on academic track. Because students of color are more likely than White and Asian students to fill spots in lower academic tracks (Oakes, 2005; Lucas & Berends, 2007; Vaught, 2011), segregation of academic track also correlates to racial segregation within the schools (Davis, 2014).
According to Gamoran (1992), tracking polarizes the student body into factions. Such “polarization” is likely caused by school-imposed labels on the tracks into which the schools sort students. The student body, along with the faculty, staff, and administration of the schools treat the factions differently, “communicat[ing] differential expectations to students by encouraging those in college-bound programs more than others” (Gamoran, 1992, p. 814). Rosenbaum (1976) believes that educators oftentimes neglect comparing the curricular options for each track, claiming that such negligence allows educators to “avoid considering the possibility that their pedagogical procedures create a selection system which limits opportunity” (p. 7).

Research on within-school segregation reveals that such practices of segregating students by race and ethnicity has adverse effects on the mental health of students of color. Cottle (1974), in his work on the psychological implications of tracking on students, claims low academic tracks are especially designed for Black students, findings echoed by Howard (2003) and Davis (2014). When applying such a belief system to within-school segregation, the same students believed that there is no place for them in the higher academic strata. Ollie Taylor, a student in Cottle’s (1974) study, reveals the psychological bearings of how tracking affects a student’s academic identity. When asked about students in the upper tracks, Ollie responded, “Upper tracks? Man, when do you think I see those kids? I never see them. Why should I? Some of them don’t even go to class in the same building with me.” Recognizing the physical barriers between students in upper and lower tracks within the school he attended, Ollie turned his attention to the school’s enforcement of the separation of students in different tracks: “If I ever walked into one of their rooms they’d throw me out before the teacher even
came in. They'd say I'd only be holding them back from their learning” (Cottle, 1974, p. 24).

Some scholars argue that within-school segregation does not happen by accident, but rather by design. The disproportionate placement of Black and Latino students in low track classes seeks to reproduce the injustices present in the larger social sphere (Conger, 2005; Conger, et al., 2009; Davis, 2014; Apple, 2012; McCloed, 2009). While equality of access is touted by some advanced track academic programs, equity in access to these programs for minority students is not necessarily ensured (Davis, 2014). In order to entice White students to high minority schools, many school districts offer prestigious academic magnet programs at school with high-minoritized student populations. Research has shown that such offerings have led to no improvements in academic outcomes for minority students, while increasing within-school segregation, as the majority of the students enrolled in the prestigious programs are White (Conger, 2005; Davis, 2014; Oakes, 2005; West, 1994).

**Summary points.** Within-school segregation, as made possible by tracking practices, continues the legacy of racial segregation in American public schools. Contemporary researchers challenge the traditional methods of examining school demographic data reports and the limits of demographic data at the whole school level. Indeed, in order to understand the dynamics of modern racial segregation, we must scrutinize data and measure racial isolation at the classroom level (Conger, 2009). While this data would be much more difficult to collect, the results would reveal much more information concerning school segregation. Contemporary forms of racial
segregation has proven to negatively affect the psychological wellbeing of students (Cottle, 1974), while limiting their future career prospects (Gamoran, 1992).

Chapter Conclusion

There is a robust body of historical scholarship examining the application of tracking practices in U.S. public schools along with other studies seeking to investigate the effects of tracking on students’ future aspirations. Other, more contemporary studies, have scrutinized the manner in which tracking methods isolate students by race within schools, essentially resegregating schools. Public schools across the U.S. have scarce representation of students of color in their advanced academic tracks. Methods used to dictate academic tracks employ the power to direct the learning opportunities and future prospects available to students. Historically, tracking practices in U.S. public schools have been employed to maintain a racially segregated society and limit academic and career prospects of students of color. The illegal practice of racial segregation continues to occur today through legal means. In magnet programs, schools within schools are created, where students attend classes in separate areas based on the track to which they are assigned. Research shows that students’ race, as opposed to academic capabilities, is a predictor of academic track, where White and Asian students are far more likely to be enrolled in advanced tracks, while Black and Latino students are far more likely to be enrolled in lower tracks (Gamoran, 1987; Oakes, 2005). In short, tracking practices are a form of racial injustice and limit opportunities for students of color.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Introductory Remarks

The purpose of this study is to analyze how students in the mainstream language arts class at a magnet high school talk about their college aspirations, centering the perspectives of the students, and examining the contexts of their educational experiences. In order to achieve these ends, I conducted a qualitative study using a series of individual interviews with the three participants followed by two focus group meetings with all the participants. This chapter examines the study’s research methods and methodology. I begin this chapter illustrating the research question. Next, I describe my epistemological orientation before describing the methodology I used to address the research question. Then, I situate the dissertation within the city and school where I conducted the research, including a discussion of my past work in that school. I then explain the methods I used to gain access to the research site and select the participants for this study. Afterward, I describe my role within the study and how I established rapport with the participants. Following this, I describe the techniques I employed for data collection and analysis. I close this chapter with a discussion of the trustworthiness and limitations of this study.

Research Question

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the intersection of tracking, within-school segregation, and student career aspirations. In order to do so, I designed a case study where I explored one primary research question: How do Black students in a mainstream language arts classroom at a magnet high school talk about their career aspirations?
Epistemological Orientation

The epistemological orientation that underpins this dissertation is social constructionism (Burr, 2015; Gergen, 1985). Social constructionism posits knowledge as something that is constructed between people through daily interactions in social life (Burr, 2015). Whereas social constructivism is a “cognitive description of knowledge,” social constructionism is a “social description of knowledge” (Triplett, 2007, p. 95). Indeed, social constructionism argues that knowledge construction is “not something people possess somewhere in their heads, but rather something people do together” (Gergen, 1985, p. 270). Gergen (1985) refers to social constructionism as a form of inquiry that “views discourse about the world not as a reflection or map of the world but as an artifact of communal interchange” (p. 266). Indeed, the manners in which different people make sense of the world are reflections of the historical contexts in which they function (Gergen, 1985).

This particular orientation argues that knowledge is “historically and culturally specific,” meaning we must examine multiple layers of context to understand how people make sense of the world (Burr, 2015, p. 15). For this study, I incorporate the larger history of the school, community, state, and nation in which the participants’ lives are situated. Social constructionists generally pose questions that examine “relations among culture, power, and language” (Triplett, 2007, p. 96). While I was particularly interested in the participants’ perspectives, I recognized how larger social and historical forces constructed their views. With the orientation that knowledge is socially constructed and is greatly influenced by historical and cultural powers and contexts, I felt a case study methodology was the logical approach to answer the research
question. A case study allows researchers to study multifaceted phenomena within their daily environments.

**Methodology**

In addressing the research question, this dissertation follows a case study methodology. Creswell (2013) defines a case study as a “qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system over time” (p. 97). Yin (2014) furthers the definition to emphasize case study as a mode of inquiry that investigates contemporary phenomena in their real-life context. The “case” must be a contemporary, complex functioning unit that is studied in its natural context (Johansson, 2003). For the purposes of this study, the case is Black students in a mainstream program at a magnet high school. Within this case, the bounded system is the mainstream track, or Mainstream program.

A need exists to study the perspectives of students within different curricular tracks to inform educational research and for policy makers to create strategies and laws that equitably serve all students. While access to all tracks in many schools follows an open enrollment process, the disproportionate ethnic and racial demographic representation in each track raises concerns over the accessibility of the more advanced tracks. In the mainstream language arts classes I observed at Washington High School (WHS), all of the students were African American. While it is not a necessity for all students to enroll in an advanced track or college preparatory curriculum, these programs are the ones that explicitly prepare their students for college admissions and provide students with the opportunity to gain college course credits through standardized exams at the end of the school year. If students express the desire and necessity to attend college, as each of the students in this study
communicated, there should be processes in place for them to have access to the college preparatory curriculum offered at the school in which they are zoned to attend. In reality, the participants in this study functioned within structures that limited them to the mainstream program, where they admitted little was done to prepare them for the realities of the college application process and college life itself. Examining the students within this structure highlights how curricular tracks act as gatekeepers, deciding who has access to the information needed to enroll in higher education.

A qualitative case study analysis exploring how Black students in WHS’s mainstream program talk about their career aspirations can illuminate implications for the psychological concerns surrounding the effects of contemporary tracking in all schools, such as labels placed on students in different tracks and the effects of racial and ethnic segregation fostered by tracking. Particularistic by nature, case studies are effective means for exploring phenomena such as tracking and within-school segregation in a particular setting and drawing broader implications (Merriam, 2009). As Merriam (2009) argues, “The general lies in the particular” (p. 51). As such, a case study methodology allows the reader to determine how the research in this study can apply to broader contexts in other, perhaps more personal, cases (Merriam, 2009). While I communicate the personal meanings conveyed by the participants within the context of this case study, the readers will reconstruct the knowledge in order to make it useful to them and their contexts.

While much of the research conducted on the intersection of tracking, within-school segregation, and career aspirations uses quantitative data to underscore the problems caused by tracking within schools over time, a case study approach makes
use of these figures and centers the study on the participants within bounded systems. A case study approach allows the participants to share their stories as they have experienced them, for the stories and lived experiences of the students within the system are those that oftentimes go unexplored. As such, this study’s purpose will seek to privilege the perspectives and voices of students in a mainstream language arts class at WHS, framing them as the teachers and holders of knowledge. As the investigator, I served as the facilitator of the conversation. In that role, I posed the questions and decided the topics that were covered before the interviews ended. Although the goal was to showcase the participants’ voices, their words originated from my prompting. In most studies conducted on curricular tracks, scholars conduct quantitative studies informed by statistics that reveal the demographics and achievement associated with different curricular tracks. These studies are important and highlight the need for reform in how we approach educating all students. A qualitative approach allows researchers to take the information from the quantitative studies and explore the people who the numbers represent. The people who live within the contexts of the studies can provide researchers with the valuable insight in the ways tracking and within-school segregation affects their lives.

Cultivating an approach that will allow me to explore the lived experiences of students within the mainstream program, a case study methodology appropriately aided in examining how students perceived their experiences within educational policies such as tracking on a local level. Interviews and a focus group meeting provided information on how student discussed their career aspirations, while my field notes described the bounded system where the research took place. To capture the physical space the
students occupied daily, I drew pictures and maps of the classroom and the hallway immediately outside the room. I also used a narrative description to capture the details regarding the teacher’s desk, the way the student desks were set up, the information on the chalkboards, the classroom walls, and the information on the bulletin boards in the hallways outside the classroom. I also noted dialogue that occurred amongst the students and between the students and the teacher both during the passing periods between classes and during the official class time. While the field notes did not necessarily capture all of the thoughts and ideas of the student participants, they presented supplementary information that helped shape the discussion in the interviews and focus group.

**Research Location**

I chose WHS in the college town of Prairieville in the southeastern United States as the research site for this study because it houses a highly competitive International Baccalaureate (IB) magnet program, providing a contrast in academic tracks students can enter, and because it is located in a city that remains largely segregated residentially and a state that defied federal desegregation orders for nearly two decades. The mainstream program at WHS had tracking within it. Students could be placed in either an honors track or the mainstream track. The participants in this dissertation were all members of the mainstream track within the mainstream program.

Historically, Southern states have been the most resistant to desegregating public schools following the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision (Clawson, 2011). In fact, the state where this study is situated was one of the final five states in the US whose public schools (kindergarten through college) remained completely segregated five years after the decision. In an attempt to adhere to federal
desegregation requirements, the state began to embrace the magnet school model, which provided a quality educational curriculum and attracted White students to schools where ethnic minorities made up a dominant majority of the student population.

**Prairieville and the Local University**

According to July 2015 US Census Bureau estimates, Prairieville was home to 130,128 residents. Of that total, 65% were White, 23% were African American, 7% were Asian, and 10% were Latino. The largest employer and economic and business hub in the city is the local university, a large public research institution. The Prairieville Annual Financial Report (2014) claimed that the university employed 40,000 people and enrolled more than 50,000 students. The closest company to the university on the list was the Henderson County School Board, which employed 4,200 people. To fully understand the context of WHS’s and Prairieville’s educational histories and contemporary contexts, we must closely examine the state’s flagship institution and Prairieville’s center of economic viability, the university.

Following WWII in 1945, Prairieville experienced unprecedented growth as scores of veterans sought to obtain a college education through the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, or GI Bill of Rights at the city’s university (Olson, 1974; Geiger, 1993; Haydock, 1996). Providing vouchers for WWII veterans to attend college, the GI Bill refashioned the image of the typical college student (Clark, 1988). Indeed, no longer were public colleges and universities marked by low enrollment numbers and occupied primarily by males from the privileged class. Now, working class men became the typical student at universities, and many schools witnessed exponential growth in order to accommodate the growing desire to obtain a college education. Mirroring the historically segregated nature of Prairieville and many other Southern communities, the
local university, however, also has a history of racial division. While the GI Bill boasted college access for veterans, no provisions were made to ensure equal access for the 125,000 Black WWII veterans. As such, the university denied all admissions to Black applicants.

Even though Prairieville’s largest employer and economic center remained completely segregated until 1958, the university, and the city by extension, grew substantially after the implementation of the GI Bill. The university’s student population grew from 588 students in 1944 to 10,573 students by 1949, a growth of 1,698% (Office of Institutional Planning and Research, 2015). More than 70% of the new students between 1945 and 1949 were returning WWII veterans. Such dramatic growth brought about issues with adequate facilities, housing, and personnel to meet the demands of a large student body. From 1947-1954, rapid construction took place in the pastures surrounding the university as the university and the city of Prairieville continued to expand (Proctor & Langley, 1986).

**Brief History of K-12 Public Education in Prairieville**

Similar to the local university for most of the 20th century, K-12 public schools in Prairieville also remained segregated. Historical accounts, however, illustrate the determination of the city’s Black community to create a flourishing school system. Following the Civil War, many freed slaves settled in the Prairieville area and immediately created schools for their children. The creation of Union Academy and Frederick Douglass High School represent the freedmen and women’s fervent desire for their community to receive an education (Houchen, 2015). Union Academy remained in business from 1860 until 1920, when African American leaders and educators made the decision to close the school because it could no longer house all of the students who
wanted to enroll. To make room for the growing desire in East Prairieville’s African American community to receive a quality education, Douglass High School opened in 1923 (Houchen, 2015). Douglass continued Union Academy’s growth trajectory and became a state accredited institution and the center of Prairieville’s African American community. In a “devastating blow to the community of students, teachers, and parents who had invested in [Douglass High School]” over its 47 years of existence, the Henderson County School Board decided to close Douglass High School in 1970 in order to comply with the Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education (1969) decision to “desegregate the district immediately” (Houchen, 2015, p. 47). In its place, the local school board voted in favor of using the magnet school model to comply with federal desegregation orders.

The Emergence of the Magnet School Model

As a result of states’ unwillingness to comply with the 1954 Brown decision to desegregate public schools, the Supreme Court extended its call for mandatory desegregation to include schools and neighborhoods through the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Fair Housing Act of 1968, and the 1969 Alexander v. Holmes decision. Magnet schools became extremely popular in states that took a “wait-and-see” approach to desegregation (Martinelli, 2015, p. 13). Attracting White students to historically Black public schools, advanced academic tracks offered at magnet schools fulfilled federal requirements in school desegregation (Martinelli, 2015). While magnet schools effectively addressed the issue of racial segregation at the school level, they fostered within-school segregation at the classroom level, as the White students who travelled to the magnet of their choice attended classes in different areas of the school buildings (Garner, 2005).
The magnet school model offers a specialized, usually attractive curriculum. Following the 1954 *Brown* decision for public schools to desegregate “with all deliberate speed,” many Southern districts placed magnet programs in schools with majority-African American populations with the intent to attract White students, skirting the issue of *de jure* segregation. As Garner (2005) noted, “a school desegregated on paper is not necessarily integrated on its campus” (p. 264). Indeed, residential segregation, historically and currently, remains an issue for Prairieville, but the IB magnet has fulfilled the technical federal requirements of desegregation, which the school board referred to as a success (Garner, 2005). Critics of the magnet school model, however, claim that magnet schools do nothing to address inequities and instead promote *de facto* segregation (Foster, 1973; Goldring & Smrekar, 2000; Welner, 2006; West, 1994).

**History of Washington High School**

WHS opened in 1970, replacing the recently closed Douglass High School as part of the local school board’s attempts to adhere to a federal mandate for immediate desegregation. Located east of the city limits of Prairieville, WHS serves approximately 1,400 students. Situated within a majority African American neighborhood, WHS has a history of limited financial support and facility management from the local district, which diverted much of its financial support to its historically White schools in the west section of town. Such inequities prompted district leadership to propose options to effectively integrate the student population at WHS (Garner, 2005). The mostly White neighborhoods in town rejected proposals for mandatory bussing and rezoning of school attendance zones by filing lawsuits and threatening to pull their children from the public school system. In response, the school board looked to create a magnet program at WHS. They felt that “if students were offered an educational opportunity that was
unavailable elsewhere in the district, then perhaps their parents would resist less to having them bused across town” (Garner, 2005, p. 255). Their assumption was correct, and as a result, WHS became home to the state’s first IB program.

According to the State Department of Education’s Public Accountability Report for the 2013-2014 school year, 52% of WHS’s students identified as African American. As home to the IB Magnet Program, WHS drew students from all corners of Henderson County. In 2014, there were more than 550 students in WHS’s IB Program, more than one-third of the entire student population. According to the IB website, the program has “a hard-earned reputation for high standards of teaching, pedagogical leadership and student achievement. We work with schools, governments and international organizations to develop challenging programmes of international education and rigorous assessment” (International Education, n.d.). Applying IB’s claim to WHS’s statistical data, as reported on their website, we see that approximately 52% of all 2014 WHS graduates were attending 4-year colleges, with 98% of the 2014 WHS IB graduates attending 4-year schools (No Child Left Behind School Public Accountability Reports).

Within WHS, the magnet program had not historically acted as a part of the school as much as it had fostered an atmosphere where the IB magnet existed apart from the mainstream student population (Garner, 2005). The IB Program cultivated within-school segregation, where the IB students, who were mostly White, attended their advanced level classes, while the neighborhood students, who were mostly Black, were relegated to mainstream program courses (Garner, 2005). Indeed, the students at WHS attended a school that was academically and racially segregated internally. In
addressing the research question, this dissertation seeks to center the voices of the students who experienced the realities of within-school segregation in school to which they were zoned to attend. As such, I cast students in the mainstream program as participants in this study.

**Previous Research Study at WHS**

My first experience with WHS occurred when I served as an internship supervisor for future secondary language arts teachers. Over four semesters, I observed preservice teachers in both IB and mainstream language arts classes. It was during these observations where the preservice teachers and I witnessed firsthand the dramatic differences between the distinctive academic tracks within the same school. The preservice teachers reflected on the difficulties they had being flexible to the varying ways students in the different tracks behaved, learned, and expressed their thoughts. These differences led me to conduct a critical ethnographic study with seven students in both the IB and mainstream tracks. Through the study, I sought to examine how students in both tracks discussed their career aspirations. The findings from this study spawned my interest in focusing my research question and conducting a case study examination of a sampling of students in the mainstream program. I discovered that the students and the teachers openly acknowledged the differences in the IB and mainstream programs, all parties frequently adopting a deficit perspective of the mainstream program. Tracing the reasons for disparities, I discovered the differences in teacher expectations at each level and the amount of student involvement at the school. Each of the above themes focused in on the final theme of the future aspirations for all of the participants in the study.
Considering the racial breakdown of the mainstream population in contrast to that of the IB population at WHS, an examination of the process in which such segregation arises must occur. One participant pointed to the racial divide in Prairieville as the root of the school’s division. He noted that “Prairieville is totally cut in half [with regards to race].” The street names of Prairieville are divided into four naming quadrants: NW, SW, NE, and SE. Until the later part of the 20th century, African Americans were confined to reside only in the east addresses (NE and SE) of the city. The legacy of restrictive residential policies continues today, as a majority of the city’s Black citizens still reside in East Prairieville. The divisions within the city were reproduced in the schools within its boundaries. Segregation “really screwed up” Prairieville’s history,” the same participant said. He continued: “The magnet program was created to encourage diversity.” He referred to the implementation of the magnet program and its function within the walls of WHS as “forced.”

The participants in the IB Program acknowledged the hegemonic nature of tracking in their specific schooling experiences. Recounting the manner in which they were selected for the high-track classes, two of the participants agreed that, due to the selection process, many students were “left behind” in early childhood education. One said that his seemingly arbitrary assignment to a gifted class in third grade set a path that “just kind of diverged like crazy” from the rest of his peers. Another participant claimed her experience was similar. She claimed she was in second grade “in a room with a lady who just asked questions about all these different things...then she came out and was talking to my mom and she says...she shouldn’t be in this ‘mainstream’ program.” She was quickly moved to the gifted program. All three IB participants in the
previous study agreed that many of the students in the mainstream program were “sharp” and deserved access to a more enriching educational experience.

The grim legacy of grouping students in primary and secondary grades continues through the post high school years. As shown with the participants in my previous research study, the IB students were set on a path to effectively complete college applications and gain admittance to the schools of their choosing. On the other hand, the mainstream participants did not possess the human capital that would push them and require them to learn about the requirements, financial aid opportunities, and the application process for the schools they wished to attend. While laws exist to ensure colleges consider all applicants, many students, like the mainstream participants in this study, are disadvantaged when it comes to accessing and completing the application.

Each of the participants in the mainstream program wished teachers and administrators treated them with as much respect as they did with the IB students and provided more guidance for college admissions. Three participants each described their dissatisfaction with the “childish” manner in which they were treated in many of their mainstream courses and how they felt that instruction time was wasted, as many of their mainstream teachers focused on seemingly futile matters, such as dress code and minor disruptions by some students. One participant, in her recollection of her time as a mainstream student, recounted the most undesirable aspect of the mainstream program where she was “treated like a child.” She, along with the mainstream participants, suffered in a system that adopted the mindset that some students do not care about education.
Contrary to the notion that mainstream students are not interested in their education, the mainstream program students in my previous study had a deep desire to learn. They wanted to attend college and had even thought about which schools they wanted to attend and which majors and degrees they wanted to pursue. Because all of the students were in a language arts class, I asked each one if they read for pleasure. More of the mainstream program participants (three out of the four) identified themselves as readers. None of the IB participants claimed to enjoy reading. One mainstream participant said that English and reading were his favorite subjects, while another claimed to “read about every night.” At the time of one of the interviews, he was reading J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. Another mainstream participant said she liked reading, stating that she was reading Patricia McCormick’s *Sold* at the time of one of the interviews. As for the IB students, in the focus group, each of them quickly shouted “No!” in unison to the question asking if they read in their spare time. “I do not read for pleasure,” one participant said. “Yeah, committing to a whole book, I just can’t do that.”

Witnessing the differences in college preparation of the two sets of participants, we see how tracking has marginalized the mainstream students, while advantaging the IB students, encouraging, even walking the IB participants through the college application and admissions process. This type of practice guarantees the continued dominance and academic success of students in high-track programs. As such, I wanted to take what I learned from the participants in the IB and mainstream programs in this previous study and design a case study that examines how students in the mainstream track talk about their career aspirations.
Participant Selection

Studying a small sample of participants within one school cannot offer a comprehensive analysis of how tracking shapes the career aspirations of all students. Therefore, this dissertation will not provide generalized explanations of how all students experience tracking and form career aspirations. Through examinations of global policies at a local level, however, this study exposes the effects of educational policies on the students within a specific setting, illuminating the inner-workings of policies such as tracking. The experiences of the students, as dictated to me during the interviews and the focus group meetings, point to specific ways their academic track has affected their career prospects. Coming from three different elementary and middle school feeding patterns, the cross-section of experiences from the three participants mirrors those of a variety of students at WHS. The goal is not to generalize the experiences of all students in mainstream academic tracks. It is to make meaning from the experiences of a wide sampling of students within the mainstream track at a single magnet high school. This dissertation, therefore, advances the dialogue on tracking through its effects on a sample of students in the mainstream program at WHS.

My goal is to cast students from the mainstream program as the authorities of what it is like to function within the mainstream track in order to help me consider ways in which schooling has influenced their lives, having them teach me about the effects of tracking on their experiences throughout their educational journey and how they influence their career aspirations. As the investigator, I constructed the interview protocols, ultimately dictated the time spent on each topic, and directed the conversation. I assuaged this imbalance of power by building rapport with the participants before the interview process began. I became more acquainted with them
through my continued presence in the classroom and through tutoring them on assignments they were completing during class. If I wanted more thorough responses and elaboration on specific ideas, then it was important that the participants felt comfortable with my presence so they would offer more information. Otherwise, their answers would possibly be brief, and they would be less likely to elaborate. The time I spent in the classroom and the interest I showed in the students’ work helped me build a relationship with the participants.

**Gaining Access**

In order to gain access to WHS for observations, I completed the required Instructional Review Board (IRB) paperwork (see Appendix E). Because I intended to interview students, I drafted and submitted participant consent forms (see Appendix C). All of the students I interviewed were minors, so I also drafted and submitted parent/guardian consent forms (see Appendix D). In an effort to maintain anonymity and protect the identity of the participants, I made explicit in the paperwork that the names of the students would appear nowhere in the study. To keep this promise, pseudonyms are used in place of the participant’s given names. Upon completion of this dissertation, the audio files from the interviews and focus groups will be deleted. The transcripts of the interviews will be made available to no one and will remain in a private, secure server. Throughout the data collection process, I reminded the students that their participation in this study was voluntary and that they could withdraw without penalty at any time. I also made clear that there would be no compensation for their participation.

Upon approval from IRB, I then completed the required paperwork for the county school district in which WHS resides, which would grant me access to the school. After a waiting period, I emailed the principal of WHS on two separate occasions, making
certain he knew my research plans and the advantages of conducting research at WHS in the specific classroom I requested. The director of research from the school district emailed me a formal approval letter, granting me access to conduct my research at WHS.

To address my research question, I collected and analyzed qualitative data using purposeful sampling of three student participants. Seidman (2006) recommends selecting a sufficient amount of participants in order to allow for saturation of information, or the point where the participants begin to repeat themselves and rely on the same responses, providing no new information. There is a point in qualitative data collection where more data does not lead to more information. Instead, it is simply restating data already collected. As Mason (2010) states, “ Frequencies are rarely important in qualitative research.” With the goal of making meaning, qualitative research is less concerned with making generalizations based on statistical recurrences that can become “superfluous” and burdensome for the qualitative researcher (Mason, 2010). As such, Creswell (2013) suggests three or four participants will sufficiently accomplish appropriate saturation in a case study approach.

During my first observations of the walk from the front office to the classroom where I observed, I recognized that most of the free wall space was dedicated to showcasing posters from different colleges and universities. There were two large bulletin boards in the hallway. One included dates where representatives from colleges would be present on campus to speak with students about their schools. The other bulletin board contained clippings from the local newspaper of athletic achievements made by students and the school’s athletic teams. Many of the clippings were from the

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previous school year. During my first two visits to the research site, I observed four mainstream language arts classes. I focused on the interactions between the students and the teacher and among the students. The classroom teacher taught the mainstream course during first, third, fourth, and fifth periods of the seven-period day. She taught a higher track language arts class during second period. The walls in her class were filled with laminated artwork and posters, showcasing different colleges and universities. There were also language arts instructional posters, warning students of common errors in usage and grammar hanging on the walls.

After a typical passing period, as soon as the tardy bell rang, the students rushed in the class and to seats on rows that were closest to the walls and the back of the classroom. I quickly learned that their urgency was because they wanted to be near the outlets, so they could plug in their mobile phones to charge them. During my first visit, the teacher introduced me to the class. She mentioned to the students that I was in a doctoral program and was interested in their individual schooling experiences. She then explained the demanding requirements of doctoral programs, focusing on the dissertation requirement, and several of the students responded in disbelief of the amount of writing required. One student said, “Good for you, but no, thank you.”

During those first two visits, I was able to meet students from all five of the teacher’s classes. She even allowed me to work one-on-one with students in each of the classes, guiding them through their lessons. I followed the classroom observations and work with the students with a discussion with the teacher. My observation notes, along with the teacher’s input, allowed us to identify the participants for this dissertation. The primary traits needed for this study included a disposition to participate in class
discussions with the teacher and other students in the class and a willingness to approach the project with seriousness and honesty.

Participants

The three student participants, Kendrick, Jeremy, and Desmond, were eager to discuss their career aspirations and returned their signed parent and participant consent forms the day after I distributed them. All Black males whose families live in the neighborhoods that are zoned to WHS, each participant attended the language arts classes I observed during different periods throughout the day. Eleventh grade students at WHS, the three of the participants centered the conversations surrounding their future aspirations on their desire to attend college. If they attended college, both Jeremy and Desmond would be first generation college students. In contrast, Kendrick’s stepfather has a college degree.

Establishing Rapport

Building rapport with the participants proved to be challenging, especially considering the structure of their school day. I worked with the teachers’ and students’ schedules in order to conduct the classroom observations. I also worked around school events where the teachers needed all of the students in the class for the entire period for testing or important lectures. After several scheduling conflicts, we were able to work out times where I could observe classes and interview students.

By conducting classroom observations, where the teacher introduced me to the students and allowed them time to ask me questions about my identity, hobbies, and purposes at WHS in a group setting, I was able to establish some sense of familiarity with the students while also identifying myself as a formal researcher. Seidman (2006) asserts that “erring on the side of formality” in the early stages of a study promotes an
atmosphere of mutual respect between the researcher and the participants, which can later build into a more familiar relationship (p. 97). Indeed, my goal was to create a friendly relationship with the participants, not a friendship (Seidman, 2006). I identified myself as a teacher of twelve years and a current doctoral student. By identifying myself as a teacher, I hoped the students would draw a parallel between their teachers and myself. The sense of comfort they felt with their teachers could help them be more authentic and open in the sharing of their experiences. By identifying myself as a student, I sought to create a sense of commonality in which we are all hoping to achieve the same educational goals. With the ultimate goal of having the participants feel safe in sharing detailed accounts of their educational experiences, recognizing common bonds and goals can serve to foster a comforting, less formal environment. Creating opportunities for the participants to provide as much data as possible greatly increases the possibilities for richer data collection over time.

Why Language Arts?

An important aspect of the research question is the type of classroom where the research study took place. I selected the language arts classroom based on a few considerations. First, as a former language arts teacher, I knew I would be more comfortable in such a classroom. Such comfort allowed me to build better relationships with the students in the class, as I tutored them on their assignments and struck conversations with them based on the work they were completing. I would be able to use my knowledge of their current topics to spark a conversation and use as a foundation of common knowledge. Another important reason why I conducted this research in a language arts class was that these classes generally involved more classroom discussions and student-led dialogue than other content areas. Classroom
discussions are natural for the language arts classroom because the key language arts components of language, culture, and identity intersect in this curriculum (Hawkins & Norton, 2009). It is through these components that ideologies are conveyed and identities are formed and people are either empowered or marginalized (Fairclough, 1995; Hawkins & Norton, 2009).

The concept of student-led discussion have the power to allow students to freely express themselves and build a trusting relationship with other members of the classroom community (Dillon, 1994; Hicks, 1996; hooks, 1994; Lindfors, 2008). Such an atmosphere of open exchange aided in pinpointing which students would be more willing to openly speak to me about their career aspirations and educational histories. Finally, language arts classes were where most conversations surrounding college and the college application process took place. When I taught high school, all of the seniors in their language arts class wrote the college essay of their choice, gearing their responses toward a specific college or university. The underclassmen wrote personal narratives that also closely mirrored many common college applications. These essays sparked conversations about college admissions during this unit. I imagined the process and conversations would be similar at WHS and would give the participants a chance to reflect on the conversations they have had concerning their college aspirations and the application process.

**Role of the Researcher**

As a high school teacher of 12 years, I did not find it challenging to situate myself within WHS. The roots of my research question reside in my career as a K-12 educator, where I taught both mainstream and advanced track classes, and during my four years as a teacher educator and researcher, where I have examined the debilitating effects of
tracking. All of my K-12 teaching experience took place in two public high schools in a large Southern city. Many schools across the country proudly tout an open access policy toward their advanced track courses. During the most recent 7 years of my 12 years in K-12 public education, I taught high school English in a school that took pride in its Advanced Placement (AP) program. During my first year at this school, I taught two mainstream language arts classes and three AP classes. In the subsequent 6 years, I strictly taught AP English Literature courses. There were more students of color in the two mainstream classes my first year than there were in my 33 AP classes combined.

The school where I taught is situated in a highly affluent area of the city. The school served two zip codes, both divided neatly by a busy freeway. The south side of the freeway is the home to many of the city’s elite doctors, lawyers, and professional athletes. It also holds the distinction of being named one of America’s “wealthiest zip codes” by Forbes magazine. With few exceptions, the zip code immediately on the north side of the freeway is largely comprised of working class families living in small, low-rent apartments. Most of the non-White students attending the school lived in the zip code north of the freeway.

The differences in the students from the two areas were not restricted to the types of clothes each group wore or the dialects in which they spoke. A glance at the course schedule would easily indicate the feeder middle school the students attended. Three middle schools fed the high school where I taught. Two were south of the freeway, and one was north of the freeway. In order for students to complete the gamut of AP math courses before graduating high school, they must have begun with Pre-AP math courses in middle school. For instance, there were three AP exams offered in
math and six possible Pre-AP/AP courses offered. If students desired to enroll in AP Calculus their senior year in high school and maintain the minimum number of credits in other core curricular areas in order to meet graduation requirements, they must have completed AP Statistics their junior year, Pre-AP Pre-Calculus their sophomore year, Pre-AP Geometry their freshman year, Pre-AP Algebra II their eighth grade year, and Pre-AP Algebra I their seventh grade year. This required students and parents to have a six-year curricular plan in place by the time the students were 11 years old.

While the expectations to reach AP Calculus were universally equal, access was not. Two of the three middle schools offered a wide range of sections of Algebra I and II, along with counselors and family members who graduated from the system who could properly advise the young students on which courses to take. The school north of the freeway did not offer a variety of scheduling options for those courses, and most of the students in the school were first generation students in the United States and/or the state and did not enjoy the convenience of considering their consequences of limiting their course options six years down the road. According to the 2015-2016 demographic breakdown, the school’s student body was made up of 2,645 students, of which only 52, or 2%, were Black and 455, or 17%, were Hispanic. Nearly all of the Black and Hispanic students resided north of the freeway and had limited access to advanced academics (The Texas Tribune, 2017). I taught AP Literature and Composition at this school for five years, and in that time, only two Black students were enrolled in that course at any given time.

During the first six weeks in my AP English Literature class, I required all of my students to compile a list of colleges and/or service academies to which they planned
on applying. They were then to research the application process and essay topics required for each school. I required them to complete one admissions essay to write and submit to me for review. This process was nothing new to the families with an abundance of cultural capital—those who attended college themselves, who had older children who had already navigated the college application process, who had the financial resources to hire college counselors. Many of these students completed all of their college applications before their senior year of high school even began. I did not design the college essay assignment for those students. I designed it in order to inform and empower the students who were new to the process and had little-to-no previous experience with the college application process.

My experiences as a teacher shaped how I made sense of the views the participants’ in this dissertation held. I do not propose that all students should attend college and that college is the correct placement for all children. Instead of proposing that the tracks themselves are problematic, I want to challenge the manners in which we assess and sort students into tracks—manners with results that mirror racial segregation before the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision. The hegemonic nature of tracking practices has mirrored racial divisions present in the outside world and affects how students shape and discuss their career aspirations.

Mainstream and college preparatory academic tracks can appropriately benefit students who aspire to work in a trade or enter college upon completion of high school. It is problematic when courses offered in the mainstream track have lowered expectations and are taught by less experienced teachers. It is also troublesome when students who aspire to attend college are placed in lower tracks based on poor sorting
earlier in their educational careers. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of mainstream tracks is how they have historically been reserved for students of color and have limited their abilities to achieve their career aspirations. This research matters because students of color continue to pay for the consequences of educational policies that are designed to disadvantage and disenfranchise specific segments of the population.

**Data Collection**

In terms of data collection, my goal was to showcase the lived experiences of the students in the study, presenting their lives, identities, and career aspirations to the field. To accomplish these ends, I employed qualitative case study methods that facilitated the collection of narrative data, such as individual and focus group interviews. The individual interviews served as an opportunity for me to “understand the lived experience of [the participants] and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2006). The focus group interviews provided me the opportunity to cultivate an environment that allowed for the participants to share freely, while drawing from each other’s perspectives and responses (Edmunds, 1999). Conducting multiple interviews with the same participants permitted me the opportunity to compare the consistency of the participants’ stories, increasing the trustworthiness of the data.

The structure of the individual interviews with each of the student participants was guided by Seidman’s (2006) in-depth interviewing model. Seidman (2006) suggests we interview each participant on three separate occasions because “people’s behavior becomes meaningful and understandable when placed in context of their lives and the lives of those around them” (pp. 16-17). As such, one meeting without context and connection between researcher and participant “tread[s] on contextual ice” (Seidman,
2006, p. 17). Indeed, multiple meetings with the participants are important to build trust and foster an environment where the participants are comfortable sharing their stories.

The first round of interviews allowed the participants to share the breadth of their earliest educational experiences (see Appendix A). For this study, I asked the participants questions that allowed them to elaborate on their experiences within the academic tracks throughout their primary years of formal schooling. Questions from the first round asked the participants to think back to elementary and middle school. They were asked to recall events that affected them positively and negatively. They were also asked to recall specific teachers they had and their memories, whether positive or negative, of those teachers. Finally, the participants were asked what they wanted to do for a career when they were in elementary and middle school and whether their aspirations changed at all in that timeframe.

The second round of interviews focused on the “present lived experience” within the mainstream track at WHS (Seidman, 2006, p 18). The questions asked the students to consider their experiences beginning with their transition or transfer to WHS through their present experiences. I asked them to tell me about WHS, guiding them to include their opinions on the types of students and teachers at WHS. I then asked them to consider and describe their favorite and least favorite subjects, classes, and teachers in high school. Then, I asked them to describe themselves as a student and how they feel about being a student at WHS. I closed the second interview asking the participants to share what they wish all teachers knew before entering the profession.

The final round of interviews, I asked the participants to “reflect on the meaning of their experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 18). This interview required the participants to
combine their educational history from the first interview with their present experiences in the second interview, clarifying the role tracking has played in their lives. I asked them what they wanted to do when they graduated high school and to consider whether or not they felt WHS has prepared them for that future. Since all of the participants expressed a desire to attend college upon graduating high school, I asked questions surrounding the types of schools each participant wanted to attend and the possible majors they would pursue.

Upon completion of the three rounds of individual interviews, I planned to hold a focus group meeting with all of the participants. Because the students had different schedules and some teachers were not able to accommodate my request to have them meet on a set date, I had to conduct two separate focus groups. While holding two focus group meetings was not in the original plan, being able to meet with a pair of students on two separate occasions allowed me the opportunity to gather more data in a group setting, as I had an extra hour to speak with the participants. Two of the three participants attended each one. One participant attended both. During the focus group meetings, I asked the participants questions regarding their experiences at WHS, their placement in the mainstream program, and their future aspirations after high school (see Appendix B). I also asked them to consider if there were advantages and disadvantages in both the IB and mainstream programs. I closed the interview asking them if they had a choice, would they allow their younger sibling to attend WHS. Using both individual interviews in combination with focus group meetings allowed for the participants to listen to the other responses and add their own personal context (Merriam, 2009). According to Bernard (2011), people are also more likely to reveal
more sensitive information in a supportive group situation. I found this to ring true, as the focus groups lasted longer than the individual interviews, and the students shared more information on their schooling experiences.

**Data Sources**

This dissertation combines field notes, face-to-face interview data from the three student participants, and the transcripts of two focus group meetings. I took field notes in a small, spiral notebook. At the beginning of every campus visit, I dated the notebook and commented on my observations beginning with my registration with the police officer who screened every vehicle that entered campus, my registration with the front office clerk who scanned my drivers license and printed a visitor's pass upon each visit, and my walks from the front office to the classroom where my observations took place and the library where the interviews took place. On the occasions I made it to campus earlier than the time the classroom teacher and I agreed upon, I stood in the hallway and read the bulletin boards and listened to the conversations of students hanging out in the hallways until the dismissal bell rang. Once in the classroom, I focused my field notes on the physical aspects of the classroom and the conversations the students had with each other, with me, and with the classroom teacher. My goal was to reconstruct, or “mirror” the spaces the participants occupy daily (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011, p. 15). Through this reconstruction, I provided a straightforward description of what I saw and heard, avoiding the use of “elaborate rhetoric, intricate metaphors, or complex, suspenseful narration” (Emerson, et al., 2011, p. 15). The primary use of the field notes was to help decide on the students who would be ideal for participating in the research and to illustrate the physical space of the classroom and the hallways the students attended school. Providing an explicit description of the setting helps position the
research into a specific context, which is imperative to research. The descriptions are
designed to situate the data from the interview and focus group transcripts.

During the interviews and focus group meetings, I followed an open-ended
interview protocol. My primary goal was to promote a casual atmosphere and impose as
few restrictions on the participants as possible, since participant comfort can cultivate
more dialogue (Madison, 2005; Reissman, 1993). Centering the voices and actions of
individual students within the mainstream program at WHS in order to understand their
career aspirations and the reasons why they hold them, these data sources provided
multiple opportunities and contexts for the participants to share their experiences and
perspectives. Each of the individual interviews took place in the school’s library.
Because a hall and library pass is required before gaining admittance to the library, the
classroom teacher wrote a permission slip for each interview. Each of the interviews
took place in the back section of the library, furthest from the entrance, in order to grant
us the most privacy and to be as far removed as possible from the noise of other people
using the library. Some interviews proved to be noisier than others, as there were as
many as three separate classes conducting research in the space. I used a digital audio
recorder to capture the dialogue between the participants and me. Using an audio
recorder allowed me to preserve the first-hand accounts of each interview, which
strengthens the accuracy of my representation of the participants’ voices (Seidman,
2006). Each interview opened with me asking the participants to state their names. I
followed with the date and whether it was interview 1, 2, or 3 for each participant. The
length of each of the interviews ranged from 30-50 minutes, depending upon the bell
schedule for the day the interview took place. On most days, there were 50 minutes in a
typical class period. The first focus group meeting took 30 minutes to complete, while the second one took 50 minutes.

I transcribed each interview and focus group in its entirety, including every utterance of the participants and mine. I conducted data analysis in multiple stages. In addition to formally analyzing and coding data after rounds of data collection were completed, I engaged in an iterative process of data analysis similar to Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) grounded theorizing, in which meaning is derived from data analysis, and “subsequent data collection is guided strategically by emergent theory” from previous stages in the data collection and analysis processes (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p.158). As such, I used the analysis of each stage of data collection to formulate the questions and discussion topics of each subsequent visit to the research site.

Data Analysis

Formal data analysis followed Creswell’s (2013) “data analysis spiral,” as I first organized data and initially read all of it in entirety (Creswell, 2013, pp. 182-3). I then conducted open, axial, and selective coding (Creswell, 2013). In open coding, I grouped the data into general topics of discussion. After creating these codes, I identified axial relationships between the major topics. Finally, I engaged in selective coding to discern the variables present in each of the axial codes. During data analysis, I focused primarily on the transcripts from the interviews and focus groups. I used the field notes solely to make decisions on selecting participants and to describe and situate the physical spaces the participants occupied.

Incorporating an iterative analysis of the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I read the transcripts after each of the three stages of data collection in order to inform how I would approach each ensuing stage. For instance, after the first round of interviews, I
transcribed the dialogue and looked for areas I would like the participants to expand upon during our next meeting. During my first meeting with Desmond, he said he felt like his teacher targeted him. The conversation then jumped to his athleticism and how he was the fastest student in his school. During the following interview, I asked Desmond to elaborate on why he felt his teacher targeted him. This practice of analyzing data in multiple stages allowed me to recognize many of the open codes early in the data collection and analysis stages.

The list of open codes that emerged from the data includes the following: the participants’ desire to speak about sports and athletics, their desire to learn in their classes, problems they had with their teachers, problems they had with school administrators, their confrontation with racism and what they thought were racist gestures by school personnel, their switching schools on multiple occasions, problems with their family members, their wanting to escape their home and school environment, their future aspirations, their perspectives of the IB Program and the students within that program, the segregation they recognized at WHS, and the naïveté with which they spoke about their futures. These codes were identified during my first two readings of all of the transcripts. I used yellow, green, orange, pink, blue, purple, and red highlighters to mark each instance of the open codes. I recognized that some of the codes overlapped, causing more than one color of highlighting to be used. For instance, on several occasions, the participants’ perspectives on the IB program (purple highlight) dealt with what they thought were racist policies (orange highlight).

After highlighting each instance of each of the open codes with different colors, I later reread the transcripts several times with fresh eyes. Becoming more acquainted
with the data and the open codes, I was able to distill the relationships in those codes into three axial relationships: the career aspirations of the participants, how the participants identified themselves as students, and how the participants discussed the mainstream and IB programs at WHS. I did this by closely examining a sheet of paper where I created a color key with the code written out next to the color highlighter I used. To develop axial relationships, I collapsed the open codes that were closely related, making larger categories. In several instances, different open codes fit under the three axial relationships. For example, under the axial relationship “the career aspirations of the students,” I used codes from the future aspirations of the students, their discussion of attending several different schools, their desire to learn, how the participants thought their teachers viewed them, and the role athletics played in their lives.

Out of the axial relationships, I was able to discern three core concepts from the analyzed data: isolation, disruption, and academic status. I arrived at these selective codes that encapsulated the data from the axial relationships by closely examining the roles of larger sociological issues that influenced the future paths of the participants. The selective codes that emerged from the data distinguish this research from similar studies on tracking, within-school segregation, and student career aspirations. For this dissertation, the participants’ isolation and their academic status within WHS were manifestations of the disruption they experienced in their school and home lives.

**Trustworthiness**

In order to increase the dependability of the data collected, I incorporated two strategies: triangulation of data and prolonged engagement with the research location. To triangulate the data, I collected data using multiple methods, field notes, three separate individual interviews, and two focus groups. My four years of prolonged
engagement with the research location allowed me to build familiarity with the school culture and provided me with knowledge I could use in my conversations with the participants. During each interview, I overlapped some questions from the previous interview, allowing for the participants to restate some details and for me to check the consistency in their statements. For instance, when discussing teachers and subjects during their time at WHS, the students were prompted to think back and draw parallels to their elementary and middle school experiences, which were captured in the first interview. I was able to compare their accounts across each of the interviews and the focus group meetings. My multiple visits to the research site allowed me more time to build a relationship with the participants, which also adds to the trustworthiness of their responses and the richness of the data they provide.

**Limitations**

The primary limitation of this study is the power dynamic of an adult researching and questioning minors. As an adult, the participants could see me as an authority figure. As such, they might withhold information they feel could be either incriminating or out of fear that I might share with other adults in the school. In an attempt to correct for this as much as possible, I implemented semi-structured interviews and gave the participants power to choose the pace of the interviews and the depth to which we would explore each topic. I also allowed them to ask me questions throughout the process. The reciprocity in interrogation allowed them to learn more about me and my interests and experiences, which in turn built a foundation of familiarity between each participant and me.

A second limitation to this study is my positionality as a White, middle-class male researching African American males. To a certain extent, there is no correcting for this
limitation. I strictly adhered to the research design in order to refrain from imposing my experiences and understanding of schooling onto those of the participants. Instead of working around this limitation, I revisited my positionality and biases throughout the data collection and analysis process in order to maintain focus on the experiences and words of the participants. Dunbar, Rodriguez, and Parker (2003) hold that familiarity and multiple visits with the participants helps build a relationship and limit issues surrounding race and subjectivity in the research process.

Finally, my experiences as a teacher in the schools where I worked have shaped my views on who is more likely to attend college and who has advantages when it comes to the college application process. I witnessed how students in AP courses have a distinct advantage when it comes to college admissions. More importantly, I recognized through teaching in both the mainstream and advanced tracks that students’ race was a predictable factor in the track they were placed. While this was the reality in my limited experiences, I was careful not to assume all schools were reflective of my prior school.

**Presentation of the Results**

Chapter 4 introduces and provides information about the educational experiences of the three participants in this case study. In Chapter 4, I closely examine the elementary and middle school experiences of the participants and the results of how they discuss their career aspirations. Chapter 4 closely examines the participants’ earliest recollections of tracking and ability grouping (tracking at the classroom level) at their different elementary, middle, and high schools. The participants also discuss the career aspirations they held in elementary, middle, and high schools.
In Chapter 5, I discuss the major themes I discovered from the collected and analyzed data. This chapter is divided by each theme and how each of the participants exemplified these themes. In short, Chapter 5 illustrates why this study matters. As three students with very different upbringings and educational backgrounds, the participants represent a wide cross-section of students, and their experiences have wide reaching implications. Such implications are discussed in Chapter 6, where I draw on the themes in Chapter 5 and discuss how this research intersects with other’s work and how it challenges what others have said about the intersection of tracking, within-school segregation, and career aspirations of students.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

Introductory Remarks

Analyzing how students in the mainstream program at a magnet school talk about their college aspirations, this case study examines the perspectives of the students and the contexts of their educational experiences. In order to achieve these ends, I followed a case study methodology using a series of individual interviews with the three participants followed by two focus group meetings with all the participants. In this chapter, I introduce the three student participants in this dissertation. All three Black males in the 11th grade at Washington High School (WHS)—Desmond, Jeremy, and Kendrick—took different paths to get to Washington and held differing perspectives concerning their education at WHS and their future aspirations.

The three individual interviews followed Seidman’s (2006) in-depth interviewing model. According to this model, the researcher should conduct three separate interviews, each one focusing on a different aspect of the phenomena on the researcher intends on studying (Seidman, 2006). Seidman (2006) suggests the first interview focus on the life history of the participants, the second interview focus on the current lived experience of the participants, and the final interview focus on the meaning of the experiences in both their current life and in their futures. I adapted these guidelines in order to answer my research question, which seeks to address how the participants talk about their career aspirations. The first interview consisted of a discussion regarding the participants’ experiences in elementary school and middle school. The second interview involved a conversation regarding the participants’ current educational experiences at WHS. The third and final individual interview centered on the future aspirations of the
participants once they finish high school. This chapter is divided into two major sections. In the first section, I introduce each of the three participants. In the second section, I examine specifically how the three participants talked about their career aspirations.

**Participants**

**Desmond**

Desmond was a 16-year old Black male in the eleventh grade. Having lived in a rural town on the outskirts of Prairieville, Desmond moved to Prairieville early in his elementary school years. At approximately 5’7” tall, Desmond had a more mature presence than the other two participants. He had a thick mustache, a deep voice, and wore long-sleeve button down shirts with pants. An only child, he lived with his mother in an apartment complex within the WHS school zone. After school and on weekends, Desmond worked at a local McDonalds. Desmond had a tough home life, pointing to a strained relationship with his mother: “I ain’t really had parents like everybody else.” He claims his mother, who had been in a foster home when she was a child, had difficulties raising him. While under foster care, she was abused at the hands of her foster parents. Because of this abuse, he said “she didn’t really know how to be a mom.” While he did not provide details regarding the abuse or his relationship with his mother, he showed some confidence in me in offering to share at a later time. He called the abuse she endured “some deep stuff. Some stuff I was surprised she told. I’ll probably tell you that some other time. Like you’d probably be surprised. You’d probably be like whoa that do sound like some movie type stuff. Like crazy.”

I spent more time with Desmond than I did with the other two participants during the first three interviews. We spoke just under 100 minutes completing the individual interview process. He was also involved in the second focus group meeting, which
lasted just under 35 minutes. On top of that, we also spent roughly 20 more minutes discussing his current studies and what he could work on now to prepare for his senior year and the college application process. Desmond was the most talkative of the three participants and appeared to appreciate the opportunities to speak with someone not formally affiliated with his school.

During the first interview, Desmond discussed his experiences and ambitions in elementary and middle school. His family moved several times early on in his life, which caused him to attend multiple schools due to the county’s zoning restrictions in public schools. During his first 10 years of schooling, he attended five different schools (three different elementary schools and two different middle schools) and repeated first grade once due to health reasons. He recalled, at an early age, telling his mother and teachers that he wanted to be a “businessman” when he finished school. Most of the memories he shared of his elementary school experience centered on his relationship with Ms. Brown, a special education co-teacher who he referred to as his “anger management teacher.” In a time when he recalled being “provoked by [his] teachers” who “blamed everything” on him “even when [he] was doing right,” Ms. Brown was always able to help him relax. He appreciated the bond he shared with Ms. Brown and said she was “like family because I don’t really know my family.”

When asked about his positive memories from elementary school, Desmond quickly responded that he was physically more mature than his peers and he took pride that he had been “the fastest person in [elementary] school.” His pride in his physical abilities carried on to his middle school years, when he attended two schools on different sides of the city. Despite the movement, he called middle school “the best time”
both academically and athletically. “I was still the fastest person,” he said. He said he had a “reputation” to uphold, and middle school allowed him the opportunity to participate in his two favorite sports, football and basketball.

Middle school was also a time when Desmond began to appreciate academics. He loved to read in middle school, and his peers called him “the smartest person in English.” His adoration of reading continued until high school, where he said he started resenting reading “cause the only time we read is when we take a test, so it’s like it just make it boring to read.” The future aspirations he held in elementary school remained steadfast in middle school. He still wanted to be a businessman. At that time, Desmond felt that business would allow him to have “control of [his] life” and provide an opportunity to “create what [he] wants to create, make money off it, and do what [he] loves and be happy about it.”

Desmond’s transition from middle school to high school was not positive. The topic of the second interview was his present educational experiences, and Desmond shared the memories and experiences of his past three years in high school. He had very little positive to say about high school: “I ain’t gonna lie. High school is the worst.” The neighborhood where he lived required he attend WHS, but he repeatedly said he never wanted to attend WHS and feels “trapped” there. “Sometimes I wish I could like go to a different high school or just go to another state and go to a real deal high school and get the real deal high school experience,” he said. Indeed, he reiterated how much he wanted to “just get away from [Washington].” The primary reason he provided for wanting to escape was that he felt the school did not have many opportunities for him athletically or academically. When asked if he still played football and basketball, he
said Washington was “not a school where you go for athletics. It’s a school where you go for like IB.” He felt that he would be much happier at any of the other high schools in the county because they would allow him to “just have a better opportunity.”

The only bright spots for Desmond were his pride in being on the “A-B honor roll” on most occasions and his experiences in Dr. Bart’s Chemistry class. He attributed his appreciation for this course to the teacher’s ability to balance relating to the students and being stern enough to discipline students who interrupted the class. He spoke highly of many of his teachers. His only criticism was that they were “too nice,” which could inhibit the learning for many of the students in the class. When asked why this was the case, he said the teachers who were “too nice” tended to be more reluctant to discipline students and keep control of the classroom. Desmond said these teachers were “the ones I be hating sometimes because they just too nice.” He felt that if they practiced more discipline, he could “learn in the class.” Being “the quiet type,” he said the noisy disruptions in most of his classes were too disruptive and he “hate[d] that most of the teachers is too nice at this school.”

As in elementary school and middle school, Desmond remained committed to his desire to become a businessman. Over time, he developed more specifics surrounding his interests and the types of business he was eager to pursue. He wanted to start a company “selling clothes, making games, linking up with other companies to help pursue [his] dreams and other stuff for like certain careers like the gaming industry and music.” While Desmond became more specific regarding the areas of business in which he was interested, he showed how interested he was in a variety or fields. He added to his list of business interests, “and clothing, and writing. Anything. I want to write poetry,
too. I do that now. I’ve been doing that since elementary.” Indeed, Desmond exhibited a keen interest in a variety of disciplines and was eager to finish high school and explore them either through college or on his own. When asked if he planned on attending college or business school, he was uncertain. He said “if” he goes to college, he wanted to “learn about the human body and probably get in like a film class to learn how to work the camera.” I asked if he thought Washington appropriately prepared him to apply, gain admittance, and be successful in business school and college in general. He responded with a simple “No.”

Jeremy

Jeremy was a 16-year old Black male in the eleventh grade. Jeremy lived in a small town about 30 miles east of Prairieville until the summer before his eleventh grade year. He and his mother moved into a neighborhood zoned to WHS. After school each day and on weekends, Jeremy worked at a Taco Bell in Prairieville. Jeremy stood at approximately 5’9” tall with a muscular build. He wore a constant smile on his face and answered every one of my questions with a “yes sir” or a “no sir.” He had an appreciation for athletics and participated in weightlifting and football. He wore basketball shorts, athletic t-shirts, and tennis shoes during each our conversations.

I met with Jeremy on five separate occasions during my observations and interviews. He was the only participant in the study who attended both focus groups. The first interview I had with him was cut short, as all students who achieved A-B honor roll were called to the cafeteria courtyard to celebrate their accomplishments with ice cream. Jeremy was one of these students. In total, Jeremy and I spent about 122 minutes in recorded conversation about his educational experiences and future.
aspirations. Jeremy is the only participant in this study who did not attend elementary and middle schools in Prairieville. In fact, this year was his first year to attend WHS.

Originally from a small town about 50 miles east of Prairieville, Jeremy had attended the town’s only elementary school from kindergarten through fifth grades. While he had some stability in his early schooling in terms of the number of schools he attended, Jeremy struggled both emotionally and academically. He referred to elementary school as a “very bad time” for him. He grew up in what he called a “tough neighborhood.” He attributed his early trials in schooling to his living conditions. The major academic trials he faced included an inability to read until late in second grade. He was pulled from his regular homeroom class in order to work with a reading interventionist. He remembered taking “a lot of classes to learn how to read.” His literacy struggles also caused him to score low on state exams, and he said because of this, he always considered himself “a bad student in first through third grades.”

I asked Jeremy if there were any positive moments he could recall from his elementary school experience. He laughed and said “graduation.” Then he stopped laughing and said he had good teachers, and attributed the three times he earned A-B honor roll in fourth and fifth grades to the dedication of his teachers. In fact, he said he never had any teachers he would consider “bad,” even though his peers would have disagreed with him. He said, “Some people called [the elementary school teachers] bad because they were about learning, and they didn’t play.” He continued: “They were just trying to teach you.”

After restating that those three times he earned honor roll and his helpful teachers were his only positive memories of elementary school, Jeremy opened up and
added that he was bullied in his early schooling years. He claimed he had been bullied at school because of his stature. “I was really short and really skinny,” he said. Being a target, he said the bullies used to push him in the dirt. He said this happened from kindergarten through second grade. I was curious as to why it all ended after second grade. He attributed this to his peers “bringing weapons to school” for protection in the third grade.

Middle school proved to be a continuation of some of the struggles Jeremy faced in elementary school. While his family did not change residences, he still had to attend two separate middle schools between grades 6-8. He said the middle school he originally attended was forced to close. He claimed the school closed because it was a “rough school” and there were “lots of fights and drugs.” On top of that, many of his peers regularly brought “other things people should not be bringing to school.” When asked what he wanted to do for a career during his early years in elementary up until the end of his middle school years, Jeremy said “[in elementary school], I wanted to be an engineer. I wanted to be an artist. And then in middle school, I switched back to engineer.” His ambitions to be an engineer continued through his transition from middle school to high school.

Jeremy attended 9th and 10th grades at the only high school in the town where he grew up. During the summer following his 10th grade year, his family moved to Prairieville. His new neighborhood was zoned for WHS. On multiple occasions, he reminded me how much happier he was at WHS, as opposed to his former schools. He attributed his appreciation of WHS to his teachers and classes. His favorite subject was geometry. When asked if there were any specific teachers he wanted to discuss,
Jeremy responded, “Well, all of my teachers. I like all of my teachers.” I wanted to know why he considered WHS to be the best school he attended. Jeremy felt that “teachers make good schools,” and all of this teachers fell in that category. He was aware of a bad reputation the school had and said he expected WHS to be “a really bad school, worse than what it is.” He could not understand why people thought it was not a good school.

At WHS, Jeremy was a member of the football and weightlifting teams. When asked to provide adjectives that defined the type of student he was, he said he was “determined and focused,” and his primary focus at WHS was to be “all about [his] grades and sports” in order to achieve his future goals. Of all three participants, Jeremy spoke more freely and without much prompting about his future aspirations. As with Desmond, Jeremy’s list of future possible careers spanned multiple academic disciplines. His elementary and middle school dreams of becoming an engineer ended in tenth grade. He said he took a technology engineering class in 9th grade and realized that engineering was not the field he wanted to pursue as a career after high school and college. He felt the class was not engaging enough and did not want to have a career so heavily dependent on mathematics.

At the time of the interviews, Jeremy wanted to go to business school and pursue a degree in economics. Even though he referred to economics as “a boring, boring subject,” he said his aspirations of earning a degree in the field stemmed from his understanding that “boring is where all the money and success is.” I asked him if money was how he defined success, and he responded, “Money is not success.” After finishing high school, he said it was absolutely certain that he would attend college, or as he called it, “a 100 percent thing.” He listed three of the more popular state universities,
including the university in Prairieville, as places where he would apply. He also mentioned that he would also apply to the local community college if needed to complete his first two years of general education requirements. Once in college, he said he wanted to do more than just study business. “I want to study [nursing] and stuff that’s going to be around for a while, like doctoring.” I was curious how much his teachers at WHS talked about college and careers with the students. Jeremy simply replied, “Not much.”

Kendrick was a 16-year old Black male in the eleventh grade. Kendrick lived his entire life in Prairieville. He lived with his mother and stepfather in a neighborhood zoned to WHS. His stepfather was an administrator at WHS. Kendrick stood at approximately 5’8” tall with a slim build. He had orthodontic braces and spoke with a lisp, perhaps due to the braces. He wore basketball shorts, athletic t-shirts, and tennis shoes during each our conversations.

Of all three participants, Kendrick was the most reluctant to speak at first. Eventually, he became more comfortable with my presence and began to offer more information and elaborate on his responses. During the first interview, he provided simple, one-sentence responses to the questions I asked. The total time for that interview was just under 10 minutes. As the first interview asked the participants to provide information about their elementary and middle school experiences, I had difficulty reconstructing his early schooling experiences in a thorough manner. During the second and third interviews, Kendrick opened up more and even asked me some questions. He was eager to speak about issues within the structure of WHS. He wanted to further discuss the segregated nature of the International Baccalaureate (IB) and
mainstream programs. We spoke for 26 and 35 minutes during the final two interviews, which took us nearly to the dismissal bell for the next class. Kendrick’s perspectives regarding WHS and college were different than the other two participants in that his stepfather worked as an administrator at both his middle and high schools and had earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees. Kendrick felt pressure at home to be prepared to attend college and do well in school.

Similar to the other participants, Kendrick moved around during his elementary school years. He attended “a lot” of schools in the area, but only remembered the name of one. Despite the frequent movement in his early schooling experiences, Kendrick claimed to love elementary school. He recalls it as a time when he had “really good grades.” His fondest memory of his elementary school years surrounded his involvement with the school’s safety patrol. As a member of the safety patrol, students were to make sure the drop off and pick up area of the school remained safe and that everyone dismissed and arrived to school as safely as possible. In order to qualify for a position in safety patrol, students had to have a C or better average in all subjects, a strong attendance record, and the ability to arrive at school early in order to carry out their patrol duties. Kendrick’s acceptance into this program built his self-esteem. He said involvement with the program made him feel “all good all around.”

A self identified “fun person who is always excited,” Kendrick said elementary school was a “fun” experience and remembers his teachers fondly. He felt that the teaches at his elementary school “actually cared about the students.” He said this was not the way he felt about his teachers in middle school and high school. Elementary school was also a time when Kendrick enjoyed recess and playing with his friends. He
felt that these things would not be present in middle school and dreaded the transition. Reflecting on his time in elementary school, Kendrick did not recall having any career ambitions, saying, “I was like, I guess, living in the moment.”

Kendrick had very little positive to say regarding his time in middle school. He quickly noted that history was his favorite subject and then turned the discussion to the genesis of his newly found passion and career ambition—video games. He discovered in middle school that he wanted to pursue a career in the video gaming industry. “I had an idea because my favorite thing is video games,” he said. “I just love them. I think it’s magic. And I was kind of like wanting to do it since I was I guess a little kid. In middle school is when it kind of hit me.” In my conversations with Kendrick, I could feel his passion for video games, as he dominated the conversations surrounding the topic and wanted to speak more about them. We shared our favorite games to play and the reasons we liked them. When the conversation turned back to middle school, he said that by the time he was in seventh grade, he “wanted to leave.” He felt that he was “targeted” by teachers because his stepdad was an employee of the school. Kendrick’s transition to high school coincided with his stepfather’s transition to the administrative team at WHS.

In the earlier part of the second interview, when we discussed Kendrick’s current educational experiences at WHS, he said that WHS was a “good school” and that the teachers were “caring and [tried] to help you move forward as you get to college.” As the interview progressed, he had few positive things to say about the school and his attitude toward being there each day. He characterized himself as a “smart student” who had his “lazy days,” where he did not feel like completing his school assignments.
In characterizing the school, he described it as “horrible and boring.” While he said history remained his favorite subject in high school, he clarified that he did not want to pursue a career in anything history related. Kendrick remained firmly committed to pursuing a career in the video gaming industry, a fact that did not align with his mother’s aspirations for him. He said he felt pressure from his mother to be a doctor or a lawyer, or even play sports. He underscored that he did not like playing sports, and said his mother thought that by playing sports, he would get an athletic scholarship to college. I asked if he considered researching and applying for academic scholarships. He said he did not feel like he learned enough in school to receive academic scholarships and that he was “trying to do better,” but he felt that he did not “have that much.” I asked him to clarify what he meant by this, and he said he constantly compared himself to the IB students and felt that they were trying harder than he was. “I can feel it,” he said.

Regarding his teachers, Kendrick said he did not appreciate those who “just wanted to have fun and watch movies in class.” He claimed this happened regularly and said he would much rather “learn and progress, so you get to go to college and are ready.” He furthered this wish with the desire that “more teachers should enforce discipline and not let the kids just run over them because no one really learns anything.” Indeed, Kendrick corroborated Desmond’s feelings that the lack of discipline in their classes was a barrier to their academic achievement. Adding to his desires to be equipped for college, I asked if he was taking any measures to prepare himself for higher education. He mentioned in several answers that he was going to college, but I checked to see if he wanted to go to college. He said, “I have to.” When asked to elaborate, he said his parents dictated that “either I’m going to college, or I’m going to
work.” I pressed the issue and asked again, “do you want to go to college?” He paused and said, “Honestly, I don’t [want to go], but I know in order to make video games, I have really no choice.”

Kendrick’s parents were more intent on him attending college than he was. In fact, he shared a story with me regarding a task his mother assigned him the summer before his junior year in high school. She required he research colleges he would like to attend. He said she told him that she did not want him to be inside the house all day, so she forced him to go to the library and do some research and write an essay on the schools he wanted to attend and why he would like to go there. “She said if I didn’t do it well, I would have to do it again.” Kendrick said he was very upset about this project because all he wanted to do was play video games. I was curious about the schools he chose to write about. He said he selected a trade school in Orlando, Florida that had a gaming and computer science program. The other school was the University of Alabama. I asked which program interested him at Alabama, and he said none in particular. “It’s just my favorite football team.” Claiming that game design would be his ideal career, he said he is assured that he will go to college and perhaps major in either gaming or computer science. When asked if he had thought about college, he said, “I’ve thought about it. I know I’ve seen it on TV, and they look so fun.”

**Summary**

The three participants each took separate educational journeys, attended different elementary and middle schools (Jeremy even attended a different high school for his ninth and tenth grade years), and had differing future aspirations. The common bond they all shared was their race, gender, and placement in the mainstream program.
at WHS. Their experiences within the mainstream program and their conversations about their careers when they finish high school drive the next section.

**How the Participants Talked about Their Career Aspirations**

To address how students in a mainstream language arts classroom in a magnet high school talk about their career aspirations, I begin this section with a discussion of how these participants envisioned their careers when they finish high school. I recognized that their conversations about life after high school are heavily shaped by their educational experiences in high school. The way they speak about their educational experiences in high school constitute the final two major sections of this chapter. The two areas that shaped the participants’ career aspirations include the way they describe their academic identities and how they speak about their placement within WHS, especially in relation to the IB Program.

In this section, I describe the aspirations the participants held upon graduating high school. The subsections below address the five major themes I found from their discussions. The first is the importance, or lack of importance, the participants placed on earning a college degree. The second theme focuses on how the participants were preparing to apply and finance a college degree. The third section examines the manner in which the participants talked about how WHS had prepared them for life outside of high school. The fourth theme centers on how the participants spoke about their future college majors and careers. The final theme is how the participants envisioned their lives in college and their careers.

**Importance of college.** Each of the participants said they intended on pursuing a college degree after graduating from WHS. The allure of a college education or the college experience, however, did not appeal greatly to any of the participants. Kendrick
said he did not want to go to college but felt forced to do so because of family pressure. Desmond considered not attending college but acknowledged that higher education was necessary for him to achieve his future goals. For Jeremy, college was an understood obstacle that must be overcome in order to achieve his definitions of success. When asked if he wanted to attend college, Kendrick said, “I have to.” He explained that his mother set an expectation requiring he go to college or move out of her home and “get a job.” He pondered for a moment about whether or not he genuinely wanted to go to college or if he wanted to fulfill his mother’s expectations. “Honestly, I don’t,” he said. “But I know that in order to make video games, I really have no choice.” Similar to Kendrick’s reluctance to accept college as the best future option, Desmond felt that he did not need a college education to define his personal success. He did, however, claim that it was important that he attend college because he felt “college will give [him] the upper hand just to see how life is, see what stuff that I probably need to become a better businessman.” He held the stance that a college education was not a necessity: “Without college, I’m still going to be successful.” He did not believe, however, that he needed a college education to achieve his aspirations of becoming a businessman. “I think I can learn it on my own by just looking up information, doing my own research and study,” he said. He felt that learning on his own might take more time, but with “hard work and dedication, it will be easy.” In contrast to Desmond’s views on the importance of a college degree, Jeremy had every intention of attending college and felt that it was a necessity to achieve his aspirations of becoming a wealthy businessman. His conversations surrounding business pointed to his perceptions of the lucrative nature of the field. When asked if he felt that money is how he defined success, he thought about
his previous statements and commented, “I don’t think success is based on money.” He then said, “I think success is based on knowledge. Knowledge brings money. Knowledge brings happiness.”

The three participants intended on attending college after completing high school. Each of them, however, held different opinions on the importance of the college degree. They each also had different external motivations for pursuing a college degree. While we established that the participants intend on attending college, the next section centers on how each one discussed how they would apply and fund their degrees.

**Applying for and funding college.** With the understanding that each of the three participants intended on attending college, our discussions steered in the direction of the methods they would use to gain admissions and fund higher education. The conversations included components and deadlines of college applications, score and GPA requirements for each of the schools to which they wanted to apply, and financial matters associated with college admissions and college life after being admitted.

The participants all had little understanding of the components of the college application process. When asked if he knew any of the application deadlines for the colleges he wanted to attend, Desmond responded, “Deadlines?” He mentioned that he wanted to apply to the University of Miami, the University of Georgia, the University of Oregon, Georgia Tech, and the local university within the city limits of Prairieville. I asked him when he thought he should apply to any of these schools. “I think like the end of your 12th grade year,” he said. “You don’t want to wait until the last minute to apply for a college and all that. Because then you might accidentally choose the wrong college to go to. You don’t want to wait until the end of the year.” The deadline for most of the
schools he listed was November 1 of the students’ senior year in high school, or eight months before the time he thought he should apply. He said that no one had told him about the deadlines. It was at this point when I removed my proverbial researcher hat and felt an obligation to spend time discussing the deadlines of most places and how to find out where to access this information. At the end of the conversation, he said, “No one didn’t tell me that.” After considering if he felt that WHS has prepared him to enter college, he responded with a resounding “No!” Elaborating on his response, he said that students in the IB Program and students at another high school in the district were better prepared to apply for and attend college. The other programs, he said, “prepare you for what you want to do. What I want to be is not here.” Mentioning a friend of his who attends another school in the district, Desmond said his friend was his primary source of knowledge concerning the requirements for college applications, including the essay requirements.

Jeremy knew more details than Desmond concerning what it took to apply for college admissions. He attributed his knowledge to conversations he had at his previous school before moving to Prairieville. He was aware that the application process should begin early in his senior year. He was also aware of GPA requirements, which was his concern during our meetings later in the semester. With final exams approaching, Jeremy wanted to make sure he scored high enough on his semester exams to boost his GPA to fall within the range his prospective colleges required. He said he had not looked at the college admissions requirements for the schools he wanted to attend since last year, when he was at his former high school. The next steps he planned to take included sitting for the ACT and SAT exams in the spring semester. He said he
was finishing his foreign language requirements his junior year, and his primary goal at the time of the interviews was to improve his GPA before applying next year (During our final meeting, he notified me that he scored an A on his Spanish final and earned the GPA he wanted.). As for financing his college education, Jeremy said he was preparing for the costs. He was aware that college was an expensive endeavor, but he and his parents had thought about it. He mentioned an alternative route to a bachelor’s degree that included attending the local junior college for two years. This option afforded students the ability to complete general education requirements at a discounted tuition rate, in comparison to most universities. In the meantime, Jeremy said, “I’m saving up now.”

Similar to Jeremy, Kendrick also had some background knowledge of the colleges he wanted to attend. During the summer between his tenth and eleventh grade years, Kendrick’s mother forced him to go to the local library and conduct research and write an essay on colleges he wanted to attend. Although his mother’s assignment forced him to think about specific colleges and universities Kendrick might consider attending, he did not research any specifics about the application process for the individual schools. I asked him when he thought the appropriate time to apply would be, and he said his senior year was when this should all happen. He said senior year was appropriate because “you learned in your eleventh grade year to make sure everything is perfectly fine with your grades and SAT scores and stuff, so I think 12th grade is when you should start applying and start shooting out stuff.” After establishing that his senior year is the time to apply, he considered if he knew of the different elements required in the application for many schools. He said he had “looked at some applications” but was
“not necessarily sure what to do.” When asked if he had thought about how to fund his college education, Kendrick said he was “still thinking about it.” He listed a couple of out of state colleges as possibilities and said he knew “out of state is really expensive” and was “trying to earn scholarships” to help defray the costs.

The participants, through their varying experiences and conversations surrounding college and life after high school, were beginning to think about their career aspirations and the role college played in achieving those aspirations. Overall, there were many misconceptions about the process to gain college admissions and fund the tuition and living expenses. In the next section, the participants discussed their intended future major and post-collegiate careers.

**Future majors and post-collegiate careers.** Each of the three participants spent a significant amount of time mulling his future college majors and careers. Desmond wanted to be a businessman because “you got control of your life” and “can create what you want to create,” while “making money off it.” For him, achieving this would allow him to “do what [he] loves and be happy about it.” Desmond admitted to having a wide range of personal interests, including gaming, poetry, medicine and fashion. Similar to Jeremy’s ambitions, he wanted to create video games that appeal to a wide range of audiences. He also wanted to sell and design clothing. I called him a “renaissance man,” and he laughed before listing other interests he was serious about pursuing. He liked to write and said he wanted to continue writing poetry after college. He said he had been writing poetry since elementary school and would happily email me some of his favorite pieces. Aside from poetry, fashion, and video games, Jeremy also wanted to study the human body because “when [he] gets a cut or something, [he]
wanted to know how to fix it or know what type of bump it is.” While he did not want to major in any medical field, he felt that taking courses in medicine would give him the knowledge he needed to fulfill his desire to “learn about the body.” He called it “a survivor thing,” where “if [he] got lost and sees something, [he] would know what to do.” My conversation with Desmond surrounding future ambitions ended with him telling me he will become a businessman with or without a college degree: “If I don’t [go to college], I’m probably going to stay at home, get a regular job, save up my money, buy cameras, and basically start my own little business.”

Similar to Desmond, Jeremy was also interested in many academic fields but was intent on becoming a businessman. “I want to go to college for many things,” he said. While business was his primary focus, he wanted to keep his career options open and felt that college would be the best place to explore those options because he wanted “to learn business, then learn how to be a doctor or registered nurse.” These fields, Jeremy believed, would give him job stability, since they will “be around for a while.” He then stated that he would continue to go to school to learn more about technology and “how to run a business better.” He wanted to “get certified in technology like [Microsoft] Word and PowerPoint and things like that.”

In contrast to Desmond and Jeremy, Kendrick clung to one aspiration throughout most of his life. He knew he wanted to design video games at an early age, and that passion continued to grow. In the eleventh grade, Kendrick was considering how to navigate becoming a video game designer and the types of colleges and academic programs that could help him achieve this dream. He was unsure if his educational history had adequately prepared him for the rigors of college. In fact, each of the
participants felt that his previous educational experiences had dictated his preparedness to achieve his aspirations. In the next section, the participants discussed how WHS has prepared them for life outside of high school.

**Preparedness for post-high school life.** In the previous sections, the participants discussed their intentions on attending college, how they were preparing to apply to college, and their future majors and careers. In this section, the participants discuss their preparedness for careers outside of high school.

As stated in the previous section, Desmond adamantly felt that WHS did not prepare him for college or for the college application process. During the first focus group meeting, Jeremy and Kendrick agreed with Desmond’s assessment. When asked how much their teachers talked about college in their classes, Jeremy said, “Not much. Not as much as I think we should talk about it.” I pointed out the impressive numbers of college posters in the hallway outside the library and those hanging in his language arts classroom where we met before each interview. Jeremy said that the posters were only decorations, and in the classroom, “[they] rarely talked about it.” Considering why this was the case, he placed the blame on the students in his classes. He said one of his teachers attempted to talk about college with her students, but “it’s so loud in there. The kids disturb the class.” Jeremy blamed the diversity of his peers’ career aspirations for the lack of conversations surrounding college in his classes. He felt that “some students were ready for college and some students didn’t want to go to college.” He pointed out that not every student wanted to go to college, but every student should have the opportunity to attend college.
The participants did not have any classes with their IB peers. Upon examining the school’s website, which includes the courses each faculty member teaches, I recognized that none of the teachers taught both IB and mainstream classes throughout the day. The few teachers who taught in two different tracks taught both IB and “Honors” track students. In their mainstream classes, Jeremy and Kendrick said their teachers did not entertain conversations surrounding life outside of high school. In fact, Jeremy said that he was “rarely in a classroom where they talk about what I want to do for a career.” Kendrick agreed and said he only talked to his friends about his future, but his teachers “rarely asked what you wanted to do for life.” Jeremy recalled the only times he could remember having a conversation surrounding college and careers at WHS. He said they usually happened during assemblies where college representatives usually told the students “college is this, and college is that” or during career day at the school each year. While he felt these few and impersonal assemblies and events were inadequate, it was still much more than what was done at the classroom level. In fact, Kendrick said his teachers usually did not promote these events. According to Kendrick, “Everybody just finds their way” regarding career advice. Jeremy agreed: “You have to find your own way, really.” Jeremy felt that the lack of guidance he and his peers had was insufficient. “I don’t think it’s enough,” he said. “I don’t think school should be how it is.” Considering how many people at WHS knew that he wanted to be a businessman, Jeremy replied, “Not many.” Thinking longer about it, he said, “Probably one.” Kendrick said no adults at the school knew what he wanted to do after graduating high school.

The three participants felt their college and career conversations with adults at WHS were inadequate or nonexistent. They held little-to-no social capital with regards
to access to information and people with knowledge about navigating higher education. Kendrick said he knew two people who went to college after graduating from WHS. According to him, the only reason they attended college was “because they played sports.” He did not know the names of the schools they attended and said, “Down here, you don’t really know the colleges.” When WHS mainstream program graduates attend college, Jeremy said, “you don’t hear about them until like later on.” Kendrick agreed: “You see them at [high school] graduation, and you’re so happy and stuff, and then two months after, you don’t know where they went.”

**Perceptions about college and careers.** The participants spoke about where they saw themselves in their careers after high school and college. Each spoke about his perceptions of college life and life in his future career. As would-be first generation college students (Kendrick’s stepfather is the only family member to have attended college), each participant shared how he felt college would be and how it would help him achieve his post-college ambitions.

Desmond imagined himself working from home after college, starting a business “on the computer.” He repeated his belief that he did not “need college in order to be successful.” He felt “since we are the generation of technology, you can just make money by pulling out your phone and recording a new video.” Discussing how recording videos generated money, he responded, “If you get a certain amount of views and then Facebook, or whoever running that website, see that you are doing good on that first video, you do the same amount of numbers, they actually send you some money in the mail.” This idea, according to Desmond, was why many of his peers “don’t really care about school sometimes because people be making money off of the website.” He felt
the financial opportunities gained through these means was better than attending
college. “You can just go on your own separate way,” he said: “As long as you know the
steps to get there, you’re straight.” Like Desmond, Jeremy also spoke on where he
thought he would be after college. He wanted to own “multiple businesses” and a “big
company,” with his first business being a store, “like Walmart.” He wanted to own a
business where he could “offer everyone a job and give everybody a chance to show
what they have.” For those who “don’t have what it takes, they get fired.”

Kendrick was reluctant to accept that college was the best option for him. He said
he wanted to attend college mostly because his mother told him he would either attend
college or immediately enter the job market. Our conversations played out as if he were
going to be a college student upon completion of high school. Considering what he
thought college would be like, he imagined he would join a program for gamers that
compete in a gaming league comprised of college students. He said these programs
hosted tournaments where the winner earned financial packages. Winners, according to
Kendrick, “actually get $1,000 or they basically pay your whole college tuition for four
years.” Joining this league would be his “dream.” His mother, however, did not envision
gaming as a future option for Kendrick. She wanted him to become a doctor, a lawyer,
or a professional athlete, but he showed no interest in any of these fields. In fact, he
said he was not interested in sports and has never played sports in his life. He believed
her wish for him to be an athlete stemmed from her desire for him to earn a scholarship
and pay for college. He felt academic scholarships were not a possibility because he
was “not learning a lot [in the mainstream program].” Kendrick blamed himself for his
perceived deficiencies. He called himself “mostly lazy in that I don’t have the
determination some people have. I try to do better, but I don’t have that much.” He also blamed himself for not thinking much about the details of gaining admittance to college. He imagined the overall image of what college would be like. His vision of higher education matched popular depictions of college on television. He imagined going to parties and having no adult supervision. “They look so fun,” he said. Kendrick also had an idea that this might not be the reality of college. He gestured and said, “I’m shaking my head because I know it’s going to be intense.”

Mainstream Students’ Academic Identities

In the previous section, the participants articulated their future aspirations, how they defined the importance of a college education, how they were preparing to apply for and fund a college education, their future college majors and careers, and how WHS has prepared them for to fulfill these aspirations. In this section, I discuss three themes that emerged from the participants’ conversations about their placement at WHS. In the first subsection, the participants talk about their grades and their previous academic achievements. In the second subsection, the participants discuss how they think their teachers perceived them. In the final subsection, the participants describe their visions of an ideal teacher and how their teachers measured up to these standards.

Participants talk about grades and academic success. External awards for academic achievement played a significant role in how each participant spoke about his educational accomplishments. Jeremy and Desmond proudly earned what the school referred to as the “A-B Honor Roll.” This meant that they earned As and Bs in each of their classes during the previous grading period. Success with grades, however, was not something they had experienced throughout all of their formal schooling experiences. For Desmond, the first time he earned A-B honor roll was in the seventh
grade. The thrill and competition of achieving something he “never” thought he would earn became an accomplishment he felt he had to accomplish each grading period. “I see how other people feel to get A-B honor roll,” he said. “One day, I made it. Then, eventually, I kept on getting it and getting it.” He discussed the recognition for his academic achievements, pointing to his pride in winning a writing award and taking pictures with the school’s principal. As a self-proclaimed competitive person, Desmond wanted his grades to get “better and better” and become habitual: “Once you get good grades, you gonna want to continue to get good grades.” For the grading period when I interviewed Desmond the second time, he made all As and one B. “You don’t wanna get no Cs no Ds no Fs or nothing like that,” he said. Desmond’s success in the classroom earned him awards in middle school. He said he won an award for being the top reading student and said he had the reputation for being “the smartest person in English.” His passion for reading did not continue through high school. He resented reading in high school because “the only time we read is when we take a test, so it just made it boring to read.”

As with Desmond, Jeremy began earning A-B honor roll later in his schooling experience. Jeremy, however, attributed his inability to earn good grades in his early school years to being unable to read until the second grade. He referred to his elementary school years as “a very bad time” because he was pulled from his regular class on many occasions for reading lessons and was unable to pass any of the state-mandated exams. He said he could not read because he was “not a great learner” and had a challenging school environment where he was bullied and mocked for being
unable to read. He said he learned how to read in the third grade and immediately began “winning the A-B honor roll” and scoring well on standardized exams.

Kendrick did not speak about the specific grades he earned in his classes. He mentioned that he was “not a smart kid” and failed at least one of his End of Course exams, required by the state department of education. On a traditional grading system, he said he would give himself a “B” as a student. He felt he could obtain “A” status, but “it just takes time.” He wished his teachers paid more attention to their students’ backgrounds because this played a role in how students learn. He felt that students without a traditional family unit of a mother and father had more obstacles in earning good grades in school.

**How students think teachers perceive them.** One key component of how students talk about schooling and their careers was how they felt their teachers perceived them. In spite of their good grades, the three participants felt their teachers viewed them in a mostly negative light. Desmond spoke about being “targeted” by his teachers on multiple occasions. He had what he referred to as an “anger management teacher” who followed him from class to class. He said he had issues dealing with anger, especially early on in his schooling experience. He felt his teachers unfairly judged him “probably because [he] was Black.” I asked what actions he did in order for his teachers to think he needed someone to follow him around. Desmond said he would throw his desk around the room, cry, and even walk out of class when he felt provoked or judged by his physical appearance. He felt that his teachers were “quick to snap” on his behavior, even though he behaved the same way everyone else in the class did. He said he did not think his teachers “really like [him]” and usually “attacked certain
[students] based on how they felt about them.” He furthered this statement saying he felt like “[he] was the target” for his teachers’ aggressions.

Similar to Desmond, Kendrick also felt as if his teachers “targeted” him. Being the child of one of the school’s administrators, Kendrick felt that sometimes his teachers and peers would take out their frustrations with his stepfather’s actions out on him. According to Kendrick, one day in class, while “everybody was talking,” he joined in. He said the teacher kicked only him out of the classroom and was certain it was because of a strained relationship between the teacher and his stepfather.

The words the participants thought their teachers would use to describe them as students illuminate how the three felt their teachers saw them as students and even as people outside of the classroom. Desmond said his teachers would likely call him “bad” and “a quitter.” He said he liked to think of himself as “funny” and as “one of the people who wanted to be somebody...like smart people.” His disciplinary issues, however, caused him to have frequent visits to the principal’s office, keeping him out of the classroom for much of his elementary and early middle school years. Desmond said he would get in trouble for “trying to be smart.” His teachers “took all their anger and frustration out on [him]” even when others in the classroom were disobeying the rules. He felt that his race played a role in his frequent disciplinary issues, and when he came to this realization, he started to hate school and was assigned to an anger management teacher. He said the treatment from his teachers would cause him to “get heated” and “cry” even when he was “trying to learn, but it’s like I guess, I’m a target because I don’t know. I guess probably because I was Black. I don’t know. That’s how I feel.”
Like Desmond, Kendrick felt that his teachers had a negative perception of him. He said they would likely call him “lazy.” Kendrick also had a negative perception of school. He referred to his time at WHS as “horrible” and “boring” but also “useful” in that there was some utility in the material he learned. He felt that going through the process of schooling felt like “an eternity” but “it’s helping [him] in life.” Kendrick identified as a “smart student” who did “have [his] lazy days.” He clarified what he meant by “lazy”: “I just don’t feel like doing my work.” He usually finished his work, but, on most occasions, he finished it dangerously close to the deadlines.

Another dynamic within teacher perceptions of students that the participants discussed involved the comparisons between the students in the IB Program and the students in the mainstream program. According to Desmond, “If you go [to school] here, you basically get judged. Probably depending on your color or whatever.” He said that teachers “assumed” students who were in the mainstream program at WHS were “bad or something like that.” The perception of mainstream students as “bad” carried over, according to Desmond, because WHS was the only gated school in the district and had an armed security guard who monitored traffic flow off and on campus. “We’re gated, and you are automatically saying you don’t trust us,” Desmond said. The concept of the gate elicited comparisons between WHS and a prison. Considering whether or not he bought into the perception that mainstream students were “bad,” Desmond agreed and said, “Oh yeah. I know we bad. From what I see, we the baddest.” He defined “bad” by the amount of fights that occurred by grade level. He felt that students in his grade fought more at school than those in the other grades. According to Desmond, the
deans, administrators, and teachers all told the 11th grade class that they were “the worst to ever come to [WHS].”

Race and behavior were key factors in distinguishing how the participants spoke about the IB and mainstream programs. On multiple occasions, Kendrick referred to students in the mainstream program as “the African Americans” and students in the IB Program as “the Caucasians.” He used these terms in lieu of the program names because Black students comprised the majority of the mainstream program, while the IB Program was comprised of mostly White students. According to Kendrick, in comparison to the IB students, the teachers referred to the mainstream students as “the slow class.” Jeremy disagreed, to an extent. “I wouldn’t say it’s a slow class,” he said: “I’ll just say it’s a more slower pace.” He qualified that statement, saying mainstream classes were slower because “teachers think you’re at a slower pace, so they try to help you at that pace.” Desmond said the “slow pace” of the mainstream classes impeded their college prospects after high school. He pointed to the IB classes, saying that the teachers in the IB Program told “their classes about where they want to go” and used class time to help make their aspirations become a reality. He referred to the reality that many of the students in the IB Program already received acceptances from their colleges of choice and had already earned college credits through dual enrollment.

**Students’ visions of their ideal teachers.** As the participants discussed how they thought their teachers perceived them, they also had the opportunity to conceive what their ideal educational experience would be, starting with what they thought effective teachers did. Each of the participants compared his experiences with his teachers past and present with how he wished all of his teachers were.
Desmond’s idea of effective teachers centered on their classroom management techniques. Desmond felt that most of his teachers were “good,” but said that a handful were “too nice.” Explaining what he meant by “too nice” and how he saw this as a deficit, Desmond discussed how when teachers are too lenient on the students, they lose control of the room, which creates a chaotic learning environment: “[The nice teachers] are the ones I’ll be hating sometimes. They need to learn how to be more mean, so I can learn in class.” Explaining specifically how many teachers he felt were “too nice,” Desmond said “most of the teachers is too nice at this school” and actually “only one” was good with discipline. Because of that, he said, “I hate it.” He wanted more teachers to enforce discipline and strike a healthy balance between being a friendly presence and an effective class manager. “Discipline is the key,” he said: “You know it’s good to communicate with the students, but you also have to learn how to control your class.” He believed the students in the mainstream program who “really want to learn” were at an unhealthy disadvantage because of his teachers’ inability to strike that balance. “The people who really want to learn, you gotta make sure they satisfied too,” he said. In fact, he commented, “Make sure they are satisfied before the other ones.”

Kendrick echoed Desmond’s sentiments regarding the classroom management of his teachers. He wished his teachers would “enforce discipline and not let the kids just run over them because no one really learns anything.” Kendrick added more details about the problems with having teachers he felt were “too lenient.” He wished they would create “good lesson plans” and elaborated: “Like you’re going to have fun today
not like oh yeah we’re just going to watch movies. We are going to actually learn and progress. So you get to go to college and are ready.”

Jeremy, in envisioning effective teachers, wished his teachers would appreciate the diverse ways in which people learn. He felt that his teachers placed too much emphasis on memorization and regurgitation of individual facts. He wished “all teachers would just learn that homework and like remembering stuff isn’t all that you should do.” According to Jeremy, most of his teachers assigned work and assessed their students on memory alone. He wanted his teachers to know that “remembering isn’t learning.” He also believed that his teachers were poor judges of assessing student learning. He felt his teachers unfairly equated student inattentiveness with a disinterest in learning. He wanted his teachers to know that when students are inattentive and disruptive that the teacher should take some responsibility, as well. “Loud isn’t bad,” he said: “Loud is just bored.” The disruptions he felt that plagued his schooling experiences and affected the amount of time teachers spent on learning about their students’ career interests were not necessarily the fault of the students. He felt that an important part of teaching was to “make [learning] fun for the students because as much as you love teaching, the students love learning.”

The participants also discussed the positive attributes of some of the teachers at WHS. Their most cherished qualities of their favorite teachers included having a “caring nature” toward their students, the ability to motivate their students, and the ability to connect with their students on academic and personal issues the students go through inside and outside of the classroom. The participants felt that teachers were the most important components of a quality school. Jeremy captured this sentiment: “I think good
teachers make good schools.” One of the major concerns the participants had with even their “good” teachers, however, was the lack of guidance and conversation regarding students’ academic and career paths.

When describing his favorite teachers at WHS, Desmond said his favorite teacher was “relaxed” and “kind of like a professor and a student at the same time.” He elaborated saying that this teacher did not pretend to “know everything” but, at the same time, was able to motivate his students to learn. This particular teacher was also able to “relate” to the students. According to Desmond, this teacher “can vibe with [the students] but also be serious.” His ability to maintain order in the class also contributed to a learning environment where Desmond felt he grew academically. Two other teachers Desmond described were those who also built personal, authentic connections with their students. He appreciated their “having faith in me that I can make it and really go to college and do something with my life.” Considering if he felt that these specific teachers would continue to “have faith” in him if he decided he did not want to attend college, Desmond said they believed in him whether or not he pursued college after graduating high school. “Like without college, they still think I’m going to be something,” he said.

In an overall analysis of his teachers at WHS, Jeremy felt that all of his teachers were strong. While he mentioned that sometimes they conflated memorization of facts with learning, overall, they were effective. He believed his teachers “motivated the students to learn.” More specifically, “They don’t just leave the student behind or go on about the lesson without the student learning.” The qualities his teachers possessed he appreciated the most were how they “made relationships with the students.” Jeremy
stated that this proved that for the teachers, this job is “not just like business or like a business.” Their empathetic qualities made the learning environment more “personal,” which “made it better to learn.” These traits also “made it better for you to come to them and tell them about problems you have in class.”

Mainstream Program versus IB Program

Perhaps the most discussed factor affecting the way the participants defined themselves as students and framed how they discussed their career aspirations were comparisons they drew between themselves and students in the IB Program. The way they identified as students is an important factor to consider when analyzing how they discuss their career aspirations, because the participants felt that career preparation started at the high school level and carried into college. They felt their current studies at WHS were important with regards to being prepared for higher education. The participants, however, felt as if they were not as important to the image of WHS as the students in the IB Program. Common conversations about WHS in the interviews referred to the school as “The IB School.” My former preservice teachers who taught at WHS during their practicum placements also referred to WHS by the same name. They also knew from older cohorts about the differences in the IB and mainstream program classrooms. In this section, I discuss the three major themes defining how the participants talked about the IB and mainstream programs. The first one is how the participants described the differences in the programs. The second theme is how they felt within-school academic and racial segregation played out at WHS. The final theme in this section is how the participants discussed their placement within the social hierarchy of the school.
Differences between the IB and mainstream programs. The participants’ conversation surrounding the differences in the programs focused on the types of students within the two programs. In the simplest of terms, Jeremy said the primary difference between mainstream and IB students was that “IB students are not bored, and mainstream students are bored.” In trying to find the source and or reasons for the boredom he felt was ubiquitous in the mainstream program, Jeremy said the reason was that IB students “find enjoyment in what they are learning” and there was little diversity in teaching and learning in the mainstream program. He felt that his teachers did not appeal to all of the students in the class. This was problematic, he felt, because “everybody needs to learn the way they know how to do it, and when they learn that way they’ll catch on eventually.” In explaining the differences in teaching IB and mainstream students, Jeremy felt that it would be “more difficult” and “better” to teach IB students. He said many people felt that “IB students learn better or are advanced,” but he was not sure if he felt the same way. He reiterated that the level of boredom was the main difference between the students in the two programs. He called IB students and courses more “focused,” which put students in the mainstream program who were serious about their future at a disadvantage. According to Jeremy, students in the mainstream program “don’t get the same opportunity because those kids are in your classroom and they distract you from learning.” On the other hand, he felt that “in IB classes, the teacher can just teach without interruptions.” Jeremy felt that the differences in teaching between the two programs played an important role in how the participants discussed their career aspirations because of the amount of time teachers in the mainstream classes had to focus on disciplinary matters as opposed to
conversations concerning their students’ futures. He believed that “IB classrooms have more time to talk about college because they are not getting interrupted [by students].”

Kendrick also believed that the major difference between the two programs was the types of students within the programs. He thought that mainstream students had a “harder life than those students in IB.” He said many of his peers did not have a family and “the only reason they act a fool is for attention.” Desmond believed that the primary difference between mainstream and IB students was that IB students were “smart,” and he and his mainstream program counterparts were not quite as intelligent when it came to being successful in school. He felt their academic aptitude was the reason students in the IB Program “already knew where they were going to college” and were making plans to see their ambitions play out. Considering if he thought college was solely for “smart people,” Desmond contended that it “kinda is.” He believed that college was designed for “people who want long term careers” and not for “people who got short careers.” He defined the longevity of a career as the amount of time it takes to earn the degree in order to move into your field. He called “long term careers” those such as doctors and lawyers. Desmond defined his interest in becoming a businessman a “short career.” He said that his more intelligent peers needed college to achieve their career ambitions, while he did not need to attend college at all.

Focusing on the advantages each program had over the other, the participants converged on college preparation. Desmond said that the biggest advantage of being in the IB Program would have been “getting in college.” He felt that IB students “went on more college trips” and “visited more places” to help better position themselves for college admissions. Jeremy agreed and added that the IB students earned the trips and
subsequent college admissions offers. He believed that “[IB students] get looked at more” because they usually graduated with higher GPAs. With regards to college admissions, Jeremy and Desmond said the mainstream program was at a disadvantage because colleges actively recruited students in the IB Program. Jeremy added that, with regards to college recruitment, IB students were “the best.” He drew an analogy to football recruiting. He said a team “will not look at the regular players” and think they are suitable. “Oh no!” he said. When colleges think about IB, “they gonna automatically think advanced,” Jeremy said. Desmond agreed, adding, “They’re intelligent.”

Jeremy believed that if the mainstream program were to have had any advantages over the IB Program it would be “the advantage of surprise” because most people “probably don’t expect [mainstream students] to do as well.” Desmond agreed with Jeremy’s assessment and added that people were surprised when he earned A-B honor roll in the previous school year. He said some of his teachers did not believe him when he told them. “It’s like they be surprised when they see a regular student that do good, especially a Black student,” Desmond said. Jeremy also noted that students in the IB Program were under more pressure because of the rigor of the coursework. Because of this, the participants felt that mainstream students were at an advantage because they faced less pressure in their coursework. Jeremy attributed the rigor of the IB Program to the reality that students in the IB Program probably did not have jobs after school. He said while he and his peers in the mainstream program were working at their jobs until 11:00 pm each night, IB students would not have time to work and complete all of their required coursework. He believed that IB students “wouldn’t be able
[to have an outside job] because they have to spend so much time with their homework.”

**Within-school segregation at WHS.** When discussing “what kinds of kids go to WHS,” the participants’ responses were similar. Each identified the dress of students in each of the programs, where students from each program ate lunch, and how the students from each program rarely came in contact with each other. Jeremy defined the two types of students who attended WHS as the “kids who are all about grades” and the “kids who get in trouble a lot.” I asked if I would be able to tell the difference between the two groups upon my first visit to the school, and he said, “Yes sir.” He believed the two groups were separated because “the students segregate themselves.” Being his first year at WHS, Jeremy felt that the students were the reason for the segregation he witnessed at WHS.

To define his views of the segregated groups within the school, Kendrick used historically troubling animalistic imagery to label mainstream and IB students. He defined the two primary segregated groups within the school as “people who act like monkeys” and “people who don’t act like monkeys.” He assigned the labels to define students in the mainstream program as people who acted like monkeys and students in the IB Program as people who did not act like monkeys. To Kendrick, being or not being a monkey “depended on if you are a mainstreamer or IB [student].” He said he had never been in an IB classroom and could not make accurate comparisons and admitted his views were “one-sided” because of his limited exposure to IB students. He felt, however, that “[IB students] get a little special treatment” and “the mainstreamers barely get any help [from the teachers].” Indeed, the participants said there were IB teachers
and mainstream teachers. The participants had not attended classes with IB students in them and did not take classes with teachers who also taught IB students. Kendrick said that if teachers “do good” at WHS, “they get moved all the way up” and are rewarded by teaching IB students. “The mainstream over here really needs the help,” he said. He believed that teachers in the IB Program were the better teachers at WHS.

The students’ use of and staking claim to the physical spaces available in the school also reinforced the segregated nature of the school. Kendrick said he did not have any friends who were in the IB Program, but an effective way to distinguish between mainstream and IB students was to recognize the divisions in the hallways, at lunch, and in the classrooms. “[IB students] don’t really hang with mainstream students,” he said. “They don’t want to associate with us.” He provided an anecdote that he felt proved this assertion. Kendrick said one of his friends had the rare experience of being in the mainstream program while taking some classes in the IB Program. For the most part, students do not take courses in both the IB and mainstream programs. In order to participate in the IB Program, students must apply and gain admittance through a process that is usually completed before students transition from middle to high school. Kendrick’s friend was participating in an activity billed for IB students only. The IB students were playing frisbee in the courtyard, and one of the teachers walked up to him and told him “he couldn’t do it because he was a hybrid.” He called this instance of not allowing a student who was a part of two separate tracks within the school “kind of racist” and “kind of fucked up, too.”

Desmond also felt the school was segregated along programmatic lines. He said he could identify the students in each of the programs by “the way they dress, the way
they act, the way they look.” He felt that students in the IB Program were “like a whole other [type of] person.” Jeremy agreed with Desmond’s assessment and added that IB students “segregate themselves” from the mainstream students in the school. The most evident form of segregation took place during the lunch periods. Jeremy said the IB students “sit on the other side at lunch.” Desmond agreed and added that IB students have the privilege to “sit outside” in “their own little area” with the picnic tables and benches. Concerning lunchtime, Desmond added that it was easy to identify IB students because they “always carry lunch” and “always carry multiple cases and stuff with them.” The reason for the multiple cases, according to Desmond, was that IB students are “always on the move” and felt obligated to quickly return to their classes immediately after lunch in order to be prepared for their next class.

When glancing at the segregated groups around the school, Desmond said it was easy to note the stark differences in dress between IB and mainstream students. He felt the IB students did not have much fashion sense. “It ain’t about fashion to them,” he said. “You throw on whatever you know trying to look decent and normal.” He called IB students’ dress “plain” and “simple.” On the other hand, mainstream students were usually “swagging or rocking a lot of designers.” He said the “one thing that really gives [the student’s program] away” was looking at student fashion. You can “likely tell who’s in IB or not just by the way they look,” he said.

**How participants view their placement in the social hierarchy of the school.**

In my conversations with the participants, I was able to discern that there existed a social stratification of sorts at WHS. They felt the school’s primary mission was to serve the needs of the IB Program. In fact, Jeremy said that the IB Program students
“basically make the school.” Desmond added, “Without IB, Washington wouldn’t be Washington.” He elaborated that if the IB Program did not exist, “Washington wouldn’t have a lot of people,” and “it wouldn’t be an A school.” He said it would be “just a lame, weak school to go to” with low graduation rates. Considering if he felt WHS was a pillar of the surrounding community, the community of families whose children, including him, were zoned to attend the school, Desmond said, “not really.” He held that the WHS belonged to the IB students and that he “had no place in the school.” He said many of his friends preferred to attend one of the other high schools in the district, but they were “basically being forced” to attend WHS.

Kendrick said the two programs existed within the same building without much tension because the mainstream program students “know their place, and the IB students know their place.” He mentioned the physical areas of the building that were unofficially reserved for students within each of the programs. IB students ate outside on the picnic tables and benches, while mainstream students ate inside. He felt this was because “IB students don’t really…want to be around us.” Once our final individual interview ended, I gave Kendrick the option to return to his classroom or stay in the library and speak with me until the bell rang. He opted to remain. He looked at me and said earnestly, “Some things need to change.” I asked if he cared to elaborate. “Some schools, like old schools, they were segregated, and I feel like it’s still in that time,” he said. “You still have IB on their side, and you have mainstream on that side.” Considering if he thought WHS was a segregated school, Kendrick nodded his head in agreement: “Exactly. I don’t see why not put them together.” He felt that dividing students did not create an optimal learning environment, and labels were unfairly placed
on each of the groups. He pointed to testing as the reason for the division. According to the school’s website, one of the major components for selection to the IB Program are applicant GPAs from their sixth and seventh grade years and state standardized testing scores from their seventh grade year. Kendrick adamantly felt that “testing should not determine someone’s intelligence.”

Chapter Conclusion

In addressing how students in a mainstream language arts classroom in a magnet high school talk about their career aspirations, I began this chapter by introducing the three student participants in this dissertation. All three Black males in the 11th grade at WHS, the participants came from different schools and family backgrounds and held diverse views on how schooling was and how it should be. Through the interviews and focus group meetings, the participants not only revealed personal information about their lives as we all became better acquainted with each other, but they also shared how they made sense of their educational experiences. These experiences shaped how each participant spoke about his career aspirations.

In the following section of this chapter, I examined specifically how the three participants talked about their career aspirations and goals upon graduating from high school. Each participant felt he would attend college after high school, but each held differing views concerning the importance of college. When discussing how they planned to apply for and finance a college degree, the participants felt and realized they were not prepared for this conversation at the time of the interviews and focus group meetings. They felt that WHS had not adequately prepared them for life outside of high school. In the final two subsections, the participants listed their future college major and
careers and provided specifics regarding how they thought life in college and in these careers would be.

Next, the participants spoke about their academic identities. When making sense of how students talk about their career and college aspirations, we must take into account how they speak about their academic history. As three students who were intent on continuing their educational careers after high school, the participants’ educational past shaped the aspirations they held and the importance they placed on schooling. Within this section, the participants discussed their grades and academic achievements and how they felt honors such as A-B honor roll played a role in their schooling experiences. They also discussed how they thought their teachers perceived them, which was mostly in negative terms. Finally, each participant had the opportunity to describe his vision of an ideal teacher and apply it to the teachers they had at WHS. There were few teachers who lived up to each participant’s lofty standards.

In the final section, the participants compared the IB and mainstream programs and how they felt within-school academic and racial segregation played out at WHS. The participants believed that the school was designed for the IB Program and that they would be better served at a different high school in the district. In the following chapter, I examine the overlapping themes that emerged from the major section from this chapter and their implications for educational practice.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

Introductory Remarks

The goal of this dissertation is to analyze how students in a mainstream program within a magnet high school discuss their career aspirations. Much of the published scholarly research explains the many problems of tracking, including its tendency of segregating the student body along racial and ethnic lines. In the previous chapter, each of the three participants discussed how he wanted to attend college after completing high school, but none of them felt prepared to make that leap. In this chapter, I explain why the results from the previous chapter are important. From the results, I recognized three major themes that cut across each of the three participants’ educational experiences: the isolation they experienced, the role that disruption played in their lives, and the academic status of the school. In each of the sections below, I explore the different ways each of the participants experienced and discussed each theme.

Isolation figured prominently in the educational experiences of these participants. I recognized that the students were literally isolated from students in other tracks within the same school. They were also isolated, in a more figurative sense, from the social and cultural capital needed to access vital information regarding achieving their career aspirations. Disruption also played a significant role in the lives of the participants. The participants blamed much of their teachers’ inability to effectively instruct on the distracting nature of the students they taught. They also discussed how turbulent their home lives were leading up to their current placement at Washington High School (WHS). Finally, an academic hierarchy existed within WHS, where the mainstream participants’ academic achievements were undermined by school and district policies.
that unequally honored students for the grades they earned in the courses they took. The intersection of these themes and the participants is noteworthy because of the diverse experiences of each of the participants. The participants were all adolescent Black males in the mainstream program at WHS, but their lives and educational histories were nothing alike. Each participant hailed from a different city, had attended different elementary and middle schools, and had divergent home lives. Indeed, the diverse life and education experiences of the three participants aids in conjecturing that the ill effects of tracking on mainstream students is pervasive and indiscriminating.

**Isolation**

Emerging from the interview and focus group transcripts was the role isolation played in the participants' schooling experiences and home lives. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2017) broadly defines *isolation* as “separation from other things or persons.” The secondary definitions, however, have major implications with regards to how the participants viewed their status within WHS. Among the key phrases in those definitions are references to separating “patients suffering from a contagious or infectious disease” and the “prevention of interbreeding between groups.” While the mainstream program students were isolated from the International Baccalaureate (IB) magnet population, the participants felt this separation served to benefit the students in the IB Program. Indeed, applying these definitions to this study and examining the data from the results chapter, the mainstream students viewed themselves as the contagion within WHS. In this section, I discuss the two major areas of isolation that emerged from the data: isolation of student populations within the school and the participants' isolation from the social and cultural capital needed in order to access information regarding the college application and admissions processes.
Within-School Isolation of Students

When discussing the racial segregation of the student body within the walls of WHS, we must examine how the magnet program facilitated the isolation of students along programmatic, and, as a result, racial lines. The goals of the magnet and mainstream programs also isolated the students in the mainstream program from the social and cultural capital needed in order to realize their future ambitions.

The divisions between the mainstream and IB programs within WHS were more than purely programmatic. While the two programs served different students with perhaps different ambitions, they also divided the student population along racial lines. The participants were acutely aware of the racial divisions between the mainstream and IB programs. The problematic labels Kendrick used to distinguish between the students in the two programs stemmed from the racial divisions often inherent in tracking. He referred to students in the mainstream program as the “Black kids” and the “people who act like monkeys,” while labeling students in the IB Program as the “White kids” and the “people who don’t act like monkeys.” While the other two participants did not use racial labels to identify students in each track within the school, they did point to the visible divisions in the classrooms and seating areas during lunch. Indeed, the racial divisions evident in the separate tracks at WHS enabled the participants to use troubling labels to identify and isolate themselves and their peers from other students.

From the perspective of the participants, disciplinary actions taken by teachers and administrators also isolated the student body by race. Kendrick and Desmond both discussed how teachers routinely and unfairly “targeted” them for behaviors that were identical to the behavior of their classmates. Desmond pointed to his physical maturity as the reason his teachers disciplined him more than his peers. He grew facial hair and
had a deep voice earlier than many of his schoolmates. Educational research shows that Black males are disciplined in schools at a much higher rate than their white counterparts (Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). One of the major reasons for this disparity is the manner in which school employees view Black males. Goff, et al. (2014) found that Black children are seen as less “childlike” than their white peers and are consequently treated more like adults. Desmond believed the way his teachers viewed his physical maturity contributed to his disciplinary problems in school and was why an anger management teacher shadowed him throughout school. Kendrick’s and Desmond’s memories of being “targeted” by their teachers frustrated them and made them feel isolated from their peers.

The presence of the different tracks within the same school also fostered a competitive atmosphere amongst the student body, isolating the students in the curriculum. The participants were proud of their academic successes, but at several points throughout the interviews and focus groups, they downplayed their accomplishments because they felt that the IB students were, as Kendrick put it, “doing more.” While none of the three participants said he would apply to and enter the IB Program if he could repeat middle and high school, each one mentioned that the IB students worked harder than mainstream students and deserved the attention they received from WHS and the colleges to which they applied. Desmond felt the IB students were “smarter” than the mainstream students, which explains why they received more attention from colleges. This mindset factored heavily into why the participants felt the school “belonged to the IB Program” and why, if they had a viable option, each of the participants would leave WHS and attend a different high school.
Indeed, there were moments when the participants exhibited the effects of internalized oppression and felt the IB students were the superior students within WHS. This mindset further isolated the mainstream participants from the students in the IB magnet program.

Internalized oppression’s ability to further isolate the student body was also evident in Prairieville’s African American community’s perception of WHS. The school is situated within a historically tightly knit community just outside of the city limits. The local schools have acted as strong pillars of Prairieville’s African American community for more than a century (Houchen, 2015). The beloved Douglass High School (DHS), which closed its doors in 1969, was a center of community pride. Schools such as DHS had acted as community centers where students spent time on campus before and after school hours in the library and commons areas or on the school’s playground and basketball courts. The participants, however, felt little-to-no connection to WHS, the school that replaced DHS. Only Jeremy participated in extracurricular activities and remained on campus after regular school hours. Desmond believed he was not experiencing the “real deal” high school experience at WHS, and he and Jeremy both yearned to be approved for a transfer to any of the other district high schools. Kendrick resented WHS because of the racial segregation and constant comparison between his academic progress and that of students in the IB Program. The common label of WHS as the “IB school” played out in the testimony of the participants. Desmond acknowledged that WHS would not be an “A school” and would be “lame and weak” without the IB Program. He felt that the White students bolstered the school’s strong academic standing and reputation. This mindset bucks the historical trend of the local
neighborhood schools being a source of pride in Prairievile’s African American community and even further isolating the mainstream participants from the rest of the student body.

**Student Isolation from Social and Cultural Capital**

When discussing their career aspirations, each of participants said he was going to college. Each knew which colleges he wanted to attend and the majors and minors he wanted to pursue at those colleges. Not one of the participants knew about the process of applying and gaining admissions to any of the schools he wanted to attend. The students in the mainstream program did not possess the social and cultural capital needed in order to navigate high school and the college application process successfully.

Bourdieu (1986) applied his concepts of social and cultural capital in order to explain how and perhaps why social hierarchies, class divisions, and academic achievement gaps exist and persist. Cultural capital can be defined as the manners in which cultural knowledge bolsters people’s position in the social hierarchy. In direct relation to schooling, Rury (2012) defines cultural capital as the “patterns of behavior, values, and attitudes [that] are more widely admired and rewarded” (p. 10). The participants were isolated from the cultural capital needed to limit the amount of discipline referrals they received and to give them the needed personal qualities to have their high school transfers approved. As Desmond pointed out, in order for another high school to approve a student transfer, students must have been able to show what they could offer that school. He felt that students with athletic talents were more likely to be rewarded a transfer, whereas students with discipline referrals on record, whether warranted or not, had a more difficult time transferring. Schools rewarded students with
transfers if they could use their athletic abilities to bolster the school’s athletic program. Indeed, the three participants did not possess the cultural traits that made them desirable candidates for a school transfer.

Rury (2012) defines social capital as the “advantages that individuals derive from relationships” (p. 11). Social capital acts as currency that provides advantages to individuals through the relationships they have been fortunate to sustain. Indeed, “knowing the right people” (Rury, 2012, p. 12) has a strong impact on both the career aspirations of students and the attainability of those aspirations. The participants possessed very little social capital with regards to people who could help them apply to and successfully enter college. Kendrick’s mother knew it was important for him to gain knowledge on colleges and that it was perhaps unlikely he would gain that knowledge at school. Her forcing him to go to the library during the summer and research schools gave Kendrick more knowledge than the other two participants whose parents did not require their children do research outside of school. As would-be first generation college students, Joseph and Desmond possessed no social capital with regards to learning about how to realize their career aspirations. They were unable to count on family members to help them through the college application process, as the process was a foreign concept to their families. They also faced difficulties accessing this information in their mainstream classrooms. The two could only guess and imagine how they could achieve their goals of attending college. The possession of convenient social capital could have steered the participants in the direction of learning more about how to make their career aspirations more easily attainable.
While students in both the IB and mainstream programs attended classes in the same larger school building and shared the same guidance counselors, their access to information regarding college admissions could not be any more disparate. The walls of the school had numerous banners and posters advertising colleges and universities across the country. Some of the posters notified students that college representatives would be at WHS to speak to students about their schools. The walls of the classroom where I conducted my observations were also decorated with posters from numerous college campuses. The participants felt these events with college representatives were geared toward the IB students and said the posters in the classroom were purely decorative. They had not engaged in any conversations with school personnel about attending college. While there existed an abundance of information regarding college around WHS’s campus, the three participants in this study felt they were isolated from accessing it.

The participants’ isolation from the social and cultural capital needed to access vital information that would help them realize their career aspirations played out in the manners in which they discussed their futures. There was a sense of naïveté in how they spoke about college, the majors they would pursue, and their future careers. Desmond, in discussing applying to colleges, felt that the appropriate time to submit applications would be the summer after graduating from high school. In reality, for the schools he said he wanted to attend, the application deadlines were during the fall semester of his senior year, or six-plus months earlier than he thought. Kendrick compared college life to the way it was depicted on television. He also imagined that a gaming club would be the center of the college experience and would pay for his tuition.
Kendrick knew he needed to think of ways to pay for tuition and living costs and felt academic scholarships were out of his reach. He believed that students in the mainstream program were isolated from academic accolades that would help them after graduating high school. Jeremy’s and Desmond’s naïveté played out in how they imagined their college course load for their desired majors. Both wanted to be business majors, but both said they wanted to take courses and even earn degrees in medical fields. Jeremy even wanted to major in business as well as earn both medical doctor and nursing degrees at the same time. He imagined the medical degrees would serve as backups in case his dreams of being a businessman were to fail. The naïve manner in which the participants imagined college would be served as a testament to the problems of isolating students from valuable information needed to make wise choices about their futures.

Overall, the participants in this study found themselves literally and figuratively isolated. They were isolated from students in the IB Program and from the social and cultural capital that could have made college admissions information more accessible. The segregated nature of the school created boundaries that kept students in the lower track from vital information that could have helped them achieve their aspirations. Instead, the participants perceived that such information was only available to students in the IB magnet.

**Disruption**

Another theme that emerged from the results included the amount of disruption in the lives of the participants. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2017) defines *disruption* as the “violent dissolution of continuity” and “forcible severance.” Each person deals with the disjointedness caused by disruptions differently. Children are perhaps the group
most psychologically vulnerable to the effects of disruptions that alter their regular patterns of living (Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2013). For the participants in this study, disturbances took on different forms. Each of the participants grew weary of the amount of classroom disturbances that occurred in their classes, which kept them from learning. All of the participants’ schooling also had numerous disruptions, as they changed schools, homes, and even cities on multiple occasions. They also discussed disruptions within their family units. In this section, I discuss these three major areas of disruption that affected the ways in which the participants imagined their career aspirations.

**Classroom Disruptions**

One of the major elements isolating students from valuable knowledge concerning their career aspirations and college access was the amount of disruptions the students said they experienced during any given day. During my visits to campus, I also witnessed the inordinate amount of distractions that took away from instruction and conversations the teacher could have had with the students. Oakes’s (2005) assertions that less meaningful student-teacher interaction occurs in the lower tracks, and that teachers of students in the lower tracks hold lower expectations of their students, rang true in the classroom I observed. From my observations, and from the accounts of the students, the teacher spent much of the class time redirecting and disciplining students. She begged students to “be quiet” on numerous occasions and even threatened to remove students from the class if they did not comply. The mainstream classes I observed acted as a holding tank for students who, according to the participants, perhaps did not aspire to attend college after high school. The conversations surrounding the post-high school plans of the participants’ older friends and family members who graduated from WHS also pointed to the rarity of college admissions for
students in the mainstream population at WHS. Kendrick and Desmond both knew a couple of WHS graduates who went to college, but they could not remember the names of the colleges the graduates attended. Although most of the students in the mainstream program did not attend college, we cannot ignore that each of the three participants wanted to attend college and lacked access to a classroom environment that was conducive to having conversations about college access. Indeed, the classroom distractions proved to be an obstacle for this study’s participants.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of the conversations surrounding classroom disruptions was how the participants felt that the teacher was free from any responsibility in preventing a tumultuous learning environment. The participants felt that their peers were mostly to blame for the arguments and class disruptions that occupied the teacher’s time. Kendrick called his peers “monkeys” because of their disruptive behavior, Jeremy said his teachers tried to have conversations about college with their students, but the students would not allow it because they were not interested in discussing their future. Their lack of interest was what caused the classroom disturbances. Gamoran and Berends (1987) found that most teachers of lower track classes plan less for their classes and exert less energy in their instruction. While I cannot speak directly to the amount of planning the participants’ teachers conducted, in the mainstream classes I observed, I witnessed very little direct instruction. One day, the students were instructed to silently read, annotate, and define words from Edgar Allan Poe’s “Annabel Lee.” On my final visit to campus, the students were watching episodes of The Simpsons. Most opted to play on their phones or watch videos with their friends on iPads. As Oakes (2005) discovered, many teachers in lower track
classes place less of a premium on collaboration, problem solving, and higher order learning goals and spend more time on individual worksheet activities and routines that promoted student silence and passivity. The lack of engagement in the classwork translated into several disciplinary issues where the teacher yelled at the students to stay on task and to stop disrupting the other students. Indeed, the classroom disruptions that manifested themselves in the form of student distractions lowered expectations of students in the mainstream program by the classroom teachers. These posed obstacles the participants and their peers had to overcome in order to realize their career aspirations.

Disruption in Student Lives

Through the participants’ discussion about their career aspirations, I was able to hear about the number of times they changed homes, schools, and cities as well as some of the various issues they had within their family lives. Desmond spent his early elementary school years in a school within a small town east of Prairieville. He moved schools no fewer than four times before enrolling at WHS. In fact, he had attended so many schools that he could not recall the names of most of them. The only positive memories he could recall from his elementary school days were those times he spent with his “anger management teacher.” Ironically, it took negative experiences and consequences with his peers and his classroom teacher in order for him to have a special education co-teacher assigned to him so that he could build one memorable positive relationship.

Similar to Desmond, Jeremy experienced a turbulent schooling experience up until his junior year at WHS. He was raised in a small town about 30 miles east of Prairieville. He did not have many positive things to say about this town and the three
schools he attended there. He did not learn to read until the third grade. That, along with his small stature, made him the target of numerous episodes of bullying, where he was teased and even beaten up. The bullying was so bad at his elementary school, he said students brought weapons to school in order to protect themselves from attacks.

Violence remained a mainstay in Jeremy’s early educational experiences. He discussed the inordinate amount of fights that occurred at the middle school he attended. His middle school closed the year after he moved to high school, and he attributed this to the high frequency of physical altercations at the campus. To Jeremy, WHS was more peaceful than his previous schools. He felt that the amount of violence was much lower and that WHS was an all-around better school.

I cannot attest to the frequency of physical altercations at WHS, but the local news outlets reported a “riot” at WHS the day before my final focus group meeting with the participants was to occur. I reached out to my contact person at the school to make sure visitors would be allowed on campus the next day. She assured me I would be allowed entry. There were more armed guards than usual at the entry gate, and I had to answer more detailed questions concerning my “business” with the school but was eventually granted entry to the school building. There was a huge police presence that day and an almost palpable tension among the student body during the passing period, which occurred as I made my way from the front office to the classroom where I met the participants. I cannot compare this incident, which received lots of attention in the local news outlets and social media, to the violence at Jeremy’s previous school. I can, however, say that the pervasive nature of the altercation served as a major disruption
within the school. Desmond and Jeremy had turbulent and even violent schooling experiences, which shaped the way they thought about schooling and their peers.

Of the three participants, Kendrick is the only one who never transferred schools. He attended the same elementary, middle, and high schools and did not move residences. He did, however, speak of events that molded the way he behaved within school and the way he thought about his future. His schooling experience was significantly different than his peers in that his stepfather was an employee of the school. Having a family member in the same building forced Kendrick to be more compliant and more fearful of disciplinary measures. Indeed, Kendrick was the most reserved of the three participants and said his parents played a prominent part in his decision-making processes and his future aspirations. Although he aspired to be a video game designer, he said his mother resented the idea and wanted him to enter a medical profession instead. His mother also wanted him to play sports in order for him to be considered for athletic scholarships. Kendrick was not interested in medicine or sports. He originally viewed his mother’s assignment to research colleges he would like to attend after graduating high school as punitive. Later, he acknowledged that his mother was actually helping him learn something he most likely would not learn in the mainstream program at WHS.

The disruption in the lives of the participants shaped the ways they discussed their educational past and career aspirations. Indeed, they functioned within school and social systems that mainly inhibited them from realizing their dreams to attend and be successful in college. Another aspect of the school system that worked to disadvantage
the participants included the hierarchical nature of the way WHS rewarded academic accomplishments.

**Academic Status**

Not all academic accomplishments are rewarded equally. Despite the lengths WHS went in order to reward all of its students for achieving the same academic milestone, longstanding district policies with regards to tracking undermined academic celebrations such as A-B honor roll parties and school graduation ceremonies. Such policies created a ranking system that assigned value to students’ academic status. By academic status, I mean both the students’ class rank in terms of GPA and the less distinguishable manner in which students were celebrated or punished for their academic standing. *The Oxford English Dictionary (2017)* defines *status* as a person’s “social or professional rank, position, or standing.” Many schools and districts rank students based on their cumulative GPA. Also, many colleges and universities view students’ GPA as an indicator of their ability to succeed in higher education. A secondary definition of status specifies that the person’s “rank, position, or standing” is usually measured by “its importance.” Indeed, when it comes to status, there is a value system at play. In magnet schools such as WHS, different values are placed on achievements in the different tracks.

**GPA and Honor Roll**

The participants of this study, as students within the mainstream program at WHS, discussed their academic accomplishments and were proud to be on the A-B honor roll. They functioned within a school that, due to the stratifying nature of tracking systems, did not reward academic accolades equally. While students from both programs received the same award for their achievement, the students in the IB
Program received an extra grade point for the grades they earned. Indeed, although the school celebrated the students in the mainstream and IB programs at the same time with the same event, the grading structures that heavily informed college preparedness and factored into college acceptance favored the students in the magnet program.

Desmond and Jeremy spoke with pride about earning their way on the school’s A-B honor roll. My first interview with Jeremy occurred when the students on A-B honor roll were treated to ice cream in the school’s main courtyard. I closed our conversation early because I did not want him to miss any of the event, and I could tell he was eager to join the celebration. Desmond first earned A-B honor roll when he was in middle school and said the sense of accomplishment he felt then was why earning it each grading period afterward became a personal goal. While the event celebrated students in both the mainstream and IB programs, the reality is that earning As and Bs in the IB Program affords students more academic currency than earning the same grades in the mainstream program. Many schools have weighted grade points, meaning that students in the higher tracks earn more points for the same letter grade than students in the lower tracks. For example, a student in English III in the IB Program at WHS who earns an “A” would receive 5 GPA points, while a student in English III in the mainstream program at WHS who earns an “A” would receive 4 GPA points. Indeed, while all of the students were celebrating their academic accomplishments at the same time, there was an unwritten yet understood hierarchy underlying the celebration. Kendrick voiced his frustration with this reality and felt that no matter how hard he worked, his IB counterparts were probably working harder and would likely earn the academic scholarships to help them finance college.
Being on the A-B honor roll in any track is a great accomplishment and deserves praise. But for a group of participants who all wanted to attend selective universities and enroll in even more selective colleges within those universities (Jeremy and Desmond aspired to attend colleges of business and medicine), the grade points they earned in high school mattered greatly. A typical student who completes the IB Program at WHS will complete 18 classes that have weighted points (some can opt to take more IB courses before graduation). This means they have the opportunity to graduate with 18 more grade points than their mainstream peers if they both earn the same grades in their courses. Examining GPA alone, the IB students make for much more competitive college applicants for the limited number of seats in a college of business.

**Formal Ceremonies**

Many district and school grading policies stratify students along racial lines. As with the mainstream and IB programs at WHS, many cases of tracking in American public schools segregate students by race and ethnicity (Oakes, 2005). These classification differences play out even in school-wide celebrations that are ostensibly designed to recognize all high-achieving students regardless of their academic track. Graduation ceremonies are designed to award high school diplomas to all students within the same school. Tracking and its uncanny ability to segregate the student body by race and ethnicity can be quite visible at graduation ceremonies. Many schools divide the graduating class by GPA and bestow regalia in the form of golden tassels and stoles on graduates who have earned the highest possible GPA. Some schools go as far as having their “honor graduates” wear different colored robes and sit in the first rows at graduation. In magnet schools such as WHS, this practice would highlight the racial divide that accompanies tracking, as the mostly White magnet program students
would occupy the first several rows donning their regal attire, while the students of color in the mainstream program would sit in the back. Indeed, grading policies associated with tracking, especially within magnet schools, can both disadvantage students in lower tracks hoping to gain admission to selective collegiate programs and also underscore the racial divide in the student body through academic celebrations such as graduation.

School Status

While a student’s standing within the school is important, being able to have that ranking translate across other campuses is perhaps more significant. A school’s ranking and prestige has an effect on the students within that school. Schools also compete for status, and the results have an impact on the students within them. The more prestigious a school is, the higher the students’ status becomes.

WHS had an impressive history of earning recognition for its overall academic accomplishments. Among national awards, Newsweek and The Washington Post perennially ranked WHS as one of the top 30 public schools in the U.S. Within its county, WHS had the most National Merit Semifinalists and Scholars. The top 1% of the scores on the Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT/NMSQT) exam are named National Merit Scholars (National Merit Scholarship Corporation, 2017). According to the school’s website, WHS has had as many as 26 students in one graduating class named to this prestigious honor.

The participants in this study were aware of WHS’s academic reputation. For instance, Desmond acknowledged that it was an “A school.” When discussing why he thought WHS had such a high status in local, state, and national rankings, the three participants pointed to the IB students. Desmond felt that WHS would be a “B or a C
school” without the IB Program. Furthermore, he believed that the school would be a “lame” and “weak” school with a lower graduation rate. Overall, he felt the IB Program should remain at WHS because “it makes the school.” Kendrick also did not necessarily want the IB Program to exist in another school. He just felt “some things need[ed] to change” with regards to the segregated nature of the school. He believed the two programs should “be put together” in order to make WHS truly a better school. Indeed, for the participants, overall test scores did not necessarily define the status of their school.

**Chapter Conclusion**

In this chapter, I explored the three themes that emerged from the results in the previous chapter: the isolation students experienced, the role disruption played in their lives, and the academic hierarchy of the school. The participants found themselves isolated from students in the other tracks within the school. The nature of magnet programs and tracking practices within most schools is to separate students by purported interest and academic goals. This separation fosters within-school racial segregation, where the mostly White students in the IB Program remained isolated from the mostly Black students in the mainstream program. As a result of the programmatic isolation, the students in the mainstream program also lacked access to valuable social and cultural capital that could have helped them prepare for their futures.

Disruption also played an integral role in the lives of the participants. Each spoke about how elements of his family life affected his past and present schooling and was a factor in how he framed his career aspirations. The participants also felt that their peers caused unnecessary disruptions in their classes, which caused their teachers to spend
inordinate amounts of time focusing on disciplinary matters as opposed to academic instruction and conversations about their students’ career interests.

Finally, I discussed how many schools, including WHS, had grading policies that further marginalized students in the lower tracks. Without access to the classes where weighted grade points are awarded, students in the mainstream program were set up to graduate with lower GPAs, causing them to have a more difficult time gaining access to selective colleges and universities. While WHS rewarded students equally in both programs for earning A-B honor roll, their policies did not grant the students the same amount of points for those achievements. The argument could be made that the courses in the two programs do not have the same goals or requirements. The counterargument would be that historically, movement of students from lower tracks to higher tracks is rare, especially for students of color (Hallinan, 2004).

The combination of isolation, disruption, and academic status shaped the educational and career aspirations of the three participants in this study. The isolation the participants experienced and their academic status in the school were results of disruption in their school and home lives. The three entities, as a group, formed obstacles that kept the participants in the study from taking the needed steps to pursue their career aspirations productively. Pinpointing the causes of the isolation in the lives of children and working to limit them can lead to fewer instances of disruptions they will experience in school. Fewer disruptions allow more opportunities for children to improve their academic status, making them more viable candidates for college admissions. Indeed, isolation, disruption, and academic status are not divorced from each other. Altering one has a ripple effect that affects the other two. Taking the needed steps to
address these issues might prove to be difficult. Structural forces in the form of school policy that has permitted issues such as programmatic isolation and within-school segregation have hindered students in the mainstream program at WHS from accessing the human and social capital that could help them achieve their aspirations. Overturning such policy, especially that which has historically benefited privileged segments of the population, is imperative if we expect to witness any positive change.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

Introductory Remarks

Through this work, I sought to place student participants’ educational experiences at the center of the research process, examining the context of their education and addressing the following question: How do Black students in a mainstream language arts classroom at a magnet high school talk about their career aspirations? To answer this question, I first examined scholarly publications on tracking, within-school segregation, and student career aspirations. Research conducted by educational historians, sociologists, and anthropologists serve as the foundation of this study and the framework for this concluding chapter. This dissertation is distinct in that it is situated within the intersection of scholarly research on tracking, within-school segregation, and career aspirations.

Underrepresentation of students of color in advanced academic tracks is an ubiquitous problem in American public schools. The practice of such sorting, or tracking, is purported to help teachers target instruction to the varying needs of their students (Gamoran, 2009). In practice, however, tracking wields the power to direct the learning opportunities and the career aspirations of students. Historically, tracking has been used to separate and marginalize specific groups of children. Some of the earliest tracks sought to deskill and condition newly freed African Americans after the Civil War to accept careers in manual, menial labor (Anderson, 1988). Other early tracks were used as a means to assimilate a burgeoning European immigrant population to dominant, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant values (Loveless, 1988). While more contemporary conversations about tracking revolve around the streamlining of education in order for
teachers to meet the diverse learning styles of their students, the effects remain the same as the disturbing historical accounts—students become segregated along racial and ethnic lines and are denied access to enriching educational opportunities that would allow them to realize their career aspirations. In essence, tracking continues to serve as a mechanism to use schools as a factory for reproducing the inequitable social hierarchy of the outside (Apple, 2012; MacLeod, 2009).

To examine how the participants in this study contextualized their career aspirations, this dissertation followed a case study methodology, using qualitative interviews and focus groups as the primary means of data collection. The collected data include field notes, face-to-face interview data from three student participants, and the transcripts of two focus group meetings. Indeed, most of the data include the words and thoughts of the student participants, for it was their voices I wanted to showcase.

To position this study, I closely examined research on tracking practices in U.S. public schools and how they have been commissioned to maintain a racially segregated society and limit the career aspirations of students of color. While these practices are used in most schools, the focus of this dissertation is on magnet schools, and how tracking has fostered within-school racial segregation of Washington High School’s (WHS) student body. Quantitative research studies have shown that children’s race, as opposed to their academic capabilities and accomplishments, is an effective indicator of their academic track. These studies have found that White and Asian students are more likely to be enrolled in advanced tracks, while Black and Latino students are more likely to be enrolled in lower tracks (Gamoran, 2009; Oakes, 2005). Indeed, tracking practices
are a form of racial injustice that have been and continue to limit minoritized students’ career aspirations.

**Implications**

There are many consistencies between the results from this dissertation and related published research. This study illustrates that each participant desired to attend college after high school, but each was woefully unprepared to have conversations on how he planned to realize those dreams. The participants blamed WHS for their inadequate preparation for the conversations we had concerning life after high school. As A-B honor roll students, the participants felt they were excellent students but did not feel that their teachers would use such lofty terms to characterize them. Howard (2003) asked 20 African American high school students at two separate urban schools about their insights on their education. He sought to understand how they discussed their academic performance, their academic identities, and their difficulties shaping positive self-identities. Similar to the students in Howard’s (2003) study, the participants in this dissertation found WHS to be a “site of resistance, alienation, silence, and ultimately failure” for Black mainstream students (p. 5). In fact, each participant felt his teachers would use negative terms to describe him. The results also revealed that on many occasions, the participants compared themselves unfavorably to the students in the International Baccalaureate (IB) magnet. They compared the IB and mainstream programs and described how within-school academic and racial segregation played out at WHS. The participants claimed that WHS was designed for the IB Program and that their own needs would be better met at different high schools in the district. Of course, the argument could be made that all students had equal access to the IB Program. The reality, however, was that transferring schools was difficult, and transferring programs
within the same school was even more difficult. Davis (2014), in a study determining whether school choice through magnet schools fulfills its purported goal of reducing within-school racial segregation, found that magnet schools appear to have fostered more White/Black segregation at the school and classroom level. Davis (2014) points out that many advanced track academic programs in magnet schools tout equal access for all students, but schools that offer these programs typically enroll White and Asian students in those tracks, relegating Black students to the mainstream track and consequently increasing White/Black within-school racial segregation.

WHS was located in an area of town predominantly inhabited by African Americans and was designed to attract White students in order to fulfill federal desegregation requirements. The IB magnet at WHS fulfilled the demographic requirements. Conger (2009) recognized that schools seeking only to abide by federal laws might not work to ensure that all students within their walls receive a quality education. Once school desegregation was achieved nearly 20 years after Brown vs. Board of Education (1954), there was no oversight implemented to guarantee that dissident schools and districts provided equal opportunities to all of their students. Laws only require school demographic data to be reported at the whole campus level. Conger’s (2009) research pushes for demographic data to be reported at the classroom level, as many campuses have schools within schools where student bodies are resegregated by race and ethnicity. Indeed, the participants of this dissertation recognized the segregated nature of WHS as a result of the magnet model it followed.

The results and discussion points from this dissertation align with much of the research on tracking and, in particular, how tracking continues to racially segregate
American public schools. In examining how students in a mainstream program at a magnet high school talk about their career aspirations, we recognize that isolation, disruption, and academic status frame their discussions and limit their future prospects.

The three major themes emerging from the data included the isolation the mainstream participants experienced at WHS, the role disruption played in their lives, and the academic hierarchy present at WHS. Similar to the results of Conger’s (2009) study of racial isolation of non-White groups within New York City schools, the Black participants in this dissertation were segregated from the mostly White students in the IB Program at WHS. Conger (2009) found that racial isolation is far more evident when examining demographic data between classrooms, as opposed to solely using school wide data. Gamoran (1992; 2009) referred to such isolation as “polarization” caused by school-imposed labels. Student separation fostered within-school racial segregation, where the mostly White and Asian students in the IB Program remained isolated from the mostly Black students in the mainstream program. As a result of this isolation, the students in the mainstream program lacked access to the much-needed social and cultural capital that could have helped them prepare for the futures they envisioned for themselves.

Disruption also played a central role in the educational experiences of the participants. Forms of disruption widespread in their lives included the classroom disruptions their peers caused in their classes. Such distractions caused their teachers to spend excessive amounts of time disciplining students as opposed to academic instruction and conversations about their students’ career interests. According to Oakes (2005), many teachers would prefer to teach advanced track classes and view lower
track classes as less desirable. In addition, Oakes (2005) found that many school administrators reserve lower track courses for more inexperienced teachers or teachers who earned lower scores on their appraisals. As such, many students in mainstream classes had teachers who were either not as experienced as the teachers in the magnet program or teachers who were unable to effectively manage student behavior.

School and district-wide grading policies further marginalized students in the mainstream program. In her study of 297 classrooms, Oakes (2005) discovered that advanced track classrooms had more resources and were designed for students to collaborate and interact with each other. Perhaps the most enticing aspect of advanced track courses was the extra grade point students could earn. Earning extra grade points makes students more appealing to colleges and universities. Lacking access to the IB Program, where weighted grade points were awarded, students in the mainstream program were relegated to courses that only awarded a more limited amount of grade points per course. These limitations could be problematic in the future, as they could cause students in the mainstream program to have a more difficult time gaining access to selective colleges and universities. If students did not want to attend college, this phenomenon would not be less problematic. The reality, however, is that each of the three participants in this study aspired to attend college. Even if they were to gain admittance, they could have a more difficult time gaining acceptance to the even-more selective programs within the larger universities, like business and medical schools. Indeed, isolation, disruption, and academic status worked together to create obstacles that kept the participants in the study from accessing the needed information that would help them achieve their career aspirations.
While many of the results from this dissertation are consistent with published research on the same topics, I found some divergences that future researchers could take into account when conducting similar studies. The primary difference between this dissertation and other research accounts of tracking and within-school segregation is that I closely examine the perspectives of individual students within the phenomenon of tracking and the consequential racial segregation tracking causes. The quantitative researchers who have informed the framework of this study have appropriately shown that tracking practices have been problematic in American schools. I took their findings and approached the phenomenon from a qualitative perspective, similar to Howard (2003). Understanding the ways in which tracking affects the students in real, personal ways is more illustrative and helps us create context and meaning. Indeed, qualitative research enables us to more closely examine critical questions within a phenomenon like tracking, such as the problems tracking can cause for students in mainstream and lower track programs.

As my primary qualitative research source on tracking, racial concerns, and career aspirations, Howard (2003) recommended five considerations we must take into account in order to help all students realize their potential and achieve their career aspirations: (1) Believe in students and their abilities to perform well; (2) Encourage college for all students; (3) Reconceptualize how we measure aptitude; (4) Discuss race and racism and how they play out in the field of education; (5) Develop more culturally and racially proficient educators. Howard’s (2003) suggestions could indeed improve the outcomes for many students. I further these recommendations and propose we address the isolation students experience within schools and the ensuing disturbances
caused by such isolation. Addressing these basic concerns can then improve the academic outcomes of students. While I agree that Howard’s (2003) addressing the problems caused by tracking can prove to be helpful, I feel that they are aimed at treating the symptoms of a much more serious concern. Since its inception in American public schools, tracking has been used as a tool to divide students along racial and ethnic lines. In order to solve the issues of isolation and disruption and improve the lives of school children, lawmakers must target educational policy that fosters the legal racial segregation in our public schools.

I do not propose detracking as a panacea for the issues surrounding tracking that are discussed in this dissertation. In fact, I feel there are some benefits to the concept of targeting curriculum to students based on their career aspirations and interests. The problems lies in how we decide which tracks we place each student. The standardized measures historically used to sort students at early ages in their educational careers have been successful in predicting students’ race and ethnicity but have not appropriately indicated the intelligence and interests of the students taking these tests. We should either work to create more appropriate testing instruments or be more conscious of the aspirations of the individual students. Mainstream/vocational and college preparatory/advanced academic tracks can appropriately benefit students who aspire to work in a trade or enter college upon completion of high school. It is problematic when courses offered in the mainstream track have lowered expectations and are taught by more inexperienced teachers. It is also troublesome when students who aspire to attend college are placed in the vocational track based on poor sorting earlier in their educational career. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of mainstream
tracks is how they have historically been reserved for students of color and have limited their abilities to achieve their career aspirations.

**Future Research**

As this dissertation reaches a close, I am reminded by the words of Nancy Dana, one of my professors and dissertation committee members, that the inquiry process never truly ends; it is a cycle where one study informs and creates more questions for future study (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). This philosophy informs who I am as a researcher, whether I am studying my own teaching practice, the educational practice of others, or the effects of practice on students. As such, the results of this study have spawned ideas for future research that I wish to explore.

One such possible research project is a participatory action research project where I follow the three dissertation participants for the next several years and studying how their career aspirations evolve over time during their senior year and after they complete high school. The moment I noticed Desmond knew so little about when to apply to college, I stepped aside from the interview protocol and gave him actual application deadlines and advice. I felt an ethical obligation to assist the participants. Future research with the same participants might afford me the opportunity to intervene and perhaps support the students as they seek to realize their ambitions.

Each of the participants planned on attending college after high school. However, I am concerned their collective lack of access to information and people who would help them achieve this feat might squash their ambitions. Further research on these same participants could be beneficial in important ways. First, hearing their voices and stories from their successes and perhaps failures could further inform research, as we would be privy to knowing whether or not they were able to access college and continue to
pursue their aspirations. Understanding if (and perhaps, in what ways) their career aspirations evolved over the following months and years and the reasons for their steadfastness or change could also further inform educational practice and how we educate future teachers in their approaches to educating all students.

Another future study might examine students in a magnet middle school. The middle school years mark the time before students apply for the district’s high school magnet program. It is also the time when they still have the ability to complete an application for the high school magnet program they would enter the following school year. A research design similar to this dissertation would fit appropriately. Research on tracking and career aspirations can benefit greatly from understanding students’ reasons for and against entering magnet programs at the middle school level and their future aspirations at such an early age. The middle school age is important because it marks the time when students are first placed in formal tracks. While ability grouping begins in the early childhood grades, formal tracks usually begin in middle school and carry into high school.

Finally, I would like to examine practicing teachers’ perceptions of teaching lower track classes. Research shows us that in many cases, teachers compete for positions teaching students in advanced tracks, while many teachers in lower tracks have lower expectations for and negative views of their students (Oakes, 2005). A case study of two or three teachers in a magnet school discussing their educational backgrounds, teacher education programs, teaching careers, and perspectives on phenomena such as tracking and within-school segregation could complement the stories Desmond, Jeremy, and Kendrick shared concerning their teachers. Much of the conversation with
the participants in this dissertation revolved around the teachers they have had throughout their schooling careers. The teachers are the ones who left impressions, both positive and negative, on the participants. Indeed, teachers wield the power to use their influence to help improve the lives of children. Teachers may also use their power to further marginalize students, especially those in lower tracks. The students, however, are the ones who suffer the consequences of educational policies and inappropriate teaching practices that disadvantage and disenfranchise specific segments of the population. The more we can do to understand patterns in teacher perceptions, the more that can be done to improve teacher practice and, more importantly, the lives of the children they serve.
APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

INTERVIEW ONE: PERSONAL INFORMATION AND PAST EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

- Think back to elementary school.
  - Tell me about something good that happened.
    - What made this so good?
    - Why do you think you remember this event?
  - Tell me about something bad that happened.
    - What made this so bad?
    - How did you feel when this happened?
    - Why do you think you remember this event?
  - What kind of kid were you in elementary school?
  - What elementary school did you attend?
  - When you look back on that school and your experiences there, what do you think about that school?
  - What was it like to move from elementary school to middle school?
  - What were you best at in middle school?
  - Tell me about a really good teacher you remember from middle school.
    - What made that teacher “good”?
  - Tell me about a bad teacher you remember from middle school.
    - What made that teacher “bad”?
  - When you were in elementary school, did you have ideas about what you might want to be when you “grew up”? Tell me about this.
    - Why do you think these things appealed to you?
    - How about in middle school? What ideas did you have about what you might be?
    - If your ideas changed from elementary school, why do you think they did?

INTERVIEW TWO: PRESENT EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

- Tell me about WHS.
  - Is this a good school? If so, what makes it good? If not, why not?
What kinds of kids are at WHS?

What kinds of teachers are at WHS?
- What do good teachers do? Give me a couple of specific examples.
- What makes a teacher bad? Give me a couple of specific examples.

What is your favorite subject in school? Why?

What has been the best class so far at WHS? Why this one?

What has been the worst class so far at WHS? Why this one?

Who is your favorite teacher? What qualities make him/her a good teacher?

What three words would you use to describe how you feel about school?

What kind of student are you at WHS?
- How do you assess yourself as a student?
- Are you a better student in some classes than others? Tell me about that.

What do you wish all teachers knew? Did?

INTERVIEW THREE: FUTURE TRAJECTORIES
- What do you see yourself doing after high school? Have you thought about some different things you might do?
- What do you think WHS is preparing you for?
- When you graduate high school, do you plan on attending college? If so, where? Why? If not, what do you plan on doing? Why?
- Do you feel like WHS has adequately prepared you for this?
- Have you considered a profession you hope to achieve? What is it?

Do you feel like WHS has adequately prepared you for this?
APPENDIX B
FOCUS GROUP SCHEDULE

- What do you think people should know about WHS?
  - Is WHS a good school? If so, why? If not, why not?
  - Are students successful here? Tell me about this.
  - Are students prepared for life here? Tell me about this.
- How much do you talk about prospective careers or college in your classes?
- Do you think this is adequate? Explain.
- Have these discussions influenced your aspirations? Explain.
- What do WHS grads do after they graduate?
- Can you distinguish between students in the mainstream program and students in the IB Program at this school? Explain.
- Can you distinguish between teachers in the mainstream program and teachers in the IB Program at this school? Explain.
- Do you think that being in the IB Program has advantages over being in the mainstream program? Explain.
- Do you think that being in the mainstream program has advantages over being in the IB Program? Explain.
- If your younger brother or sister could choose which high school to go to, would you recommend WHS? Why? Why not? What high school would you recommend? Why this one?
APPENDIX C
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Dear __________________

My name is Todd McCardle, and I am a PhD student from the University of Florida working on a research project on how students in a mainstream language arts class in a magnet high school talk about their career aspirations. As part of this study, I want to include the voices of students, and I am interested in hearing your story, specifically.

There aren’t going to be very many students asked to be in the study, probably only 3. I’ve completed a lot of reading to prepare for this study, and in what I’ve discovered, the voices and perspectives of students are missing. I’d like you to volunteer to take part in this project and fill this research gap.

Your participation is entirely up to you! You do not have to participate. You won’t be punished if you decide to say no. Even if you say yes and change your mind at a later date, you can still opt out without any punishment from anyone. Also, if you do decide to participate, you won’t get anything extra.

There are no direct benefits or risks to you for participating in the study. So what am I asking you to do? How can you help me? I would like to interview you and use a tape recorder to record your answers so that I can type them later. I will then erase the tapes. All interviews will take place in the WHS Library during times your classroom teacher approves. None of the interviews will require you to miss any instruction or school activities. A maximum of three interviews will work best, and each one will be between thirty to forty-five minutes long. I have a few questions that I will ask, but there’s also room for you to talk about your experiences. I will use your answers as part of my study. I would like to keep this information in my files for 5 years, and after that time, I will destroy the information.

No one will have permission to look at my notes or listen to my tapes; I am the only one who will. Anything you tell me will be private. There are a few exceptions – if you talk about hurting yourself or someone else or you tell me about someone who hurt you, then I am obligated to report this information. I cannot keep it a secret if you or someone else might get hurt.

If you would like to participate in this study, please sign your name below. If you have any questions, call me at (832) 216-6909 or email me at tmccardle@ufl.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Sevan Terzian at sterzian@coe.ufl.edu if you would like to ask him any questions about me or the project. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the University of Florida Institutional Review Board at (352) 392-0433 or by email at irb2@ufl.edu.

Thank you so much for thinking about doing this.

Sincerely,

Todd McCardle
PhD Student, University of Florida

☐ YES, I would like to participate in this study.

Student’s Signature: __________________________________________ Date: ____________________
Dear Parent/Guardian:

My name is Todd McCardle, and I am a PhD graduate student from the College of Education at the University of Florida working on a research project. I am interested in how students in the Mainstream program at Washington High School talk about their career aspirations. I have done a lot of research on the topic, and something important is missing: the stories of the students themselves.

Your child will be one of three students selected for this survey.

Participation in the study is voluntary, and I need your signature and your child’s signature if he/she is going to participate. There are no direct benefits or risks to you for not participating in the study. There is no penalty or punishment if you or your child refuses to participate and either you or your student can remove him/herself from the process at any time. I want to have three interviews of thirty to forty-five minutes and record their responses with your permission, as well as your child’s. All interviews will take place in the WHS Library during times your child’s classroom teacher approves. None of the interviews will require your child to miss any instruction or school activities. Your child’s name will not be used in the data collection or publication; his/her identity will be protected with a false name, and no personal information will be released.

Also, there is no compensation for your student’s participation. He/she receives nothing extra and gets no special treatment if he/she participates. I will transcribe the interviews and I will keep the notes and data on the project for five years, and after that time has passed, all materials will be destroyed. Immediately after I transcribe the interviews, I will erase the audio files. No one other than me will have access to the information at any point of the research or publication process so that your child’s privacy is protected.

During the interviews, I will ask your child questions about their past and present educational experiences, asking him/her to think back to elementary and middle school and reflect on specific school activities and teachers he/she has had. I will also ask your child about his/her present experiences at WHS. Finally, I will ask your child about his/her plans after high school. When the individual interviews are completed, I will hold a focus group, where all of the participants will meet and discuss their thoughts on school and their future plans. I will treat the focus group discussion with the same level of confidentiality as the individual interviews and ask the students to do the same. I cannot guarantee the participants will keep all of the information from the focus group portion confidential. Also, if your child talks about hurting his or herself or someone else or if he/she tells me about someone who hurt him/her, then I am obligated to report this information. I cannot keep it a secret if your child or someone else might be harmed.

Please sign below if you permit your child to take part in this study. Cooperation is, of course, much appreciated. If you have any questions, please contact me at (832) 216-6909 or by email at tmccardle@ufl.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Sevan Terzian at sterzian@coe.ufl.edu if you would like to ask him any questions about me or the project. If you have questions about your child’s rights as participants, please contact the University of Florida Institutional Review Board at (352) 392-0433 or by email at irb2@ufl.edu.

Finally, if you agree to sign and let your child work with me on this project and have any
questions or would rather deliver the document to me in person, please call me. If you’d rather mail it back to me, I can provide a self-addressed, stamped envelope that you can use to mail it back to me.

Sincerely,

Todd McCardle
PhD Student, University of Florida

☐ YES, I allow my child ____________________________ to participate in this study.
   (child’s name)

Parent/Guardian’s Signature: ____________________________ Date: ______________
DATE: 10/4/2016
TO: Todd McCandie
PO Box 117048, PO BOX 117048
Gainesville, Florida 326117048
FROM: Ira Fischler, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus
Chair IRB-02
IRB#: IRB201601672
TITLE: How Students in a Mainstream Track Talk about Their Career Aspiration

Approved as Expedited
Expires on: 10/3/2017

You have received IRB approval to conduct the above-listed research project. Approval of this project was
granted on 10/4/2016 by IRB-02. This study is approved as expedited because it poses minimal risk and is
approved under the following expedited category/categories:

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not
limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language,
communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research
employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human
factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. [Note: Some research in this
category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human
subjects. (45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3).) This listing refers only to research that is
not exempt.]

Approval Includes, but is not limited to:

Dated and watermarked IRB-approved Informed Consent Form(s)

Consent Waiver Type(s): There are no items to display

Special notes to Investigator (if applicable):

It is essential that the parents/guardians of your minor participants sign a copy of your approved informed
consent that bears the IRB approval stamp and expiration date.

Principal Investigator Responsibilities:

The PI is responsible for the conduct of the study.

- Using currently approved consent form to enroll subjects (if applicable)
- Renewing your study before expiration
- Obtaining approval for revisions before implementation
- Reporting Adverse Events
- Retention of Research Records
- Obtaining approval to conduct research at the VA
* Notifying other parties about this project's approval status

If you have not completed the study prior the expiration date, please telephone our office (392-0433) and we will discuss the renewal process with you. **Additionally, should you complete the study on or before the expiration date, please complete and submit the closure report.**

**Study Team:**

Sevan  Terzian  Co-Investigator
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

A native of Vinton, Louisiana, Todd McCardle graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in English Education from McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana in 2001. Upon graduation, he moved to Houston, Texas to begin his career as a classroom teacher. He taught five years at Mayde Creek High School in the Katy Independent School District. During his time at Mayde Creek, he earned a Master of Education degree in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Houston. In 2006, Todd accepted a teaching position at Memorial High School in the Spring Branch Independent School District, where he taught for seven years. In 2013, Todd was accepted to the PhD program in curriculum and instruction at the University of Florida. He earned his doctorate in 2017 with a focus in schools, society, and culture and accepted a position as Assistant Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Eastern Kentucky University. His research interests include the roles of diversity and issues of social justice in public schools.