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The Impact of Student Tracking on Latino/a Students at WHS

Abstract

The tradition of student tracking remains to be prevalent in American schools and poor and minority students continue to be underrepresented in higher tracked classes. Washington High School is located in an urban city in Massachusetts in which 65% of the student population is Latino/a. This study seeks to create a voice for the experience of this Latino/a population, both socially and academically, while promoting an awareness of the implications of student tracking. This study uses observations and interviews of both current and former Latino/a students at WHS, as well as faculty members, and hopes to yield findings that will educate the WHS community, while motivating and encouraging more Latino/a students to challenge themselves academically. The fact remains that Latino/a students are sorely underrepresented in the higher classes and feel this environment is often stressful and intimidating, while the percentage of the total student population is reflected in standard tracked classes. Latino/a students remain proud and use a number of methods to challenge the status quo and defy stereotypes that surround the Latino/a population. The Latino/a population is the fastest growing population in the United States, it is important that more Latinos/as learn more about tracking and its implications for the attainment of higher education.

Harry Melendez III '12

Introduction

Tracking is the practice of sorting students by academic ability level for all classes. Through various assessments, students are usually labeled as above average (or gifted), average, or below average. This designation determines the student's courses (AP, Honors or Regular). Students are grouped only with similarly “labeled” classmates. This mode of class reproduction is defended by claiming that by placing students in these ability groups, each student’s need will be met. Throughout history, student tracking has caused constant discussion and debate amongst educators, students, parents and researchers in the education field. Jeannie Oakes is one of the biggest critics of student tracking and has published numerous articles and other works that assess the pros and cons of tracking. According to Oakes, like many practices in schools, tracking emerged as a solution to a specific set of educational and social problems at a particular time in history¹. Tracking became popular in the late 19th century when both educational and social forces weighed heavily on schools, which led to dramatic alterations in the quantity and quality of secondary schooling. As “college preparation” became increasingly popular, and the population of secondary school graduates grew, schools began to use tracking in order to “sort and select” students that would most likely be attending an institution of higher education.

At Washington High School, 65 percent of the student population is Latino/a, but only about 35 percent of the students in the honors and AP track are Latino/a.² On the contrary, the

¹ Oakes, J. (2005). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality*. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press.

² <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=01370505&orgtypecode=6&>

Latino/a population of the entire school is reflected in the percentage of Latinos/as enrolled in the standard classes and in some standard classes, that percentage is exceeded.³ Clearly Latino/a students are underrepresented in the “college-bound” tracks at WHS, which creates a gap in the educational opportunities for Latino/a students. My research questions are: What has been the experience both socially and academically of the Latino/a student population in different tracks at Washington High School? Are Latino/a students aware they are being tracked? Are these students aware of the implications of tracking?

Case for Significance

This research is important for a variety of reasons. This research is grounded in my own personal experience as a Latino student who has been tracked. Upon entering high school, I was tracked in the “accelerated” classes, but after struggling academically in my freshman year, the system lost faith in me and I was demoted into the standard track. After adjusting to the high school environment, I excelled in the standard track, motivating my teachers to recommend that I move up. During this time, I did not know the implications of being enrolled in these classes, but trusted that the teachers had my best interest in mind. What if I had not been able to move back into the higher tracks? Would I be at an institution of higher education?

Washington City has a Latino/a population of 48.4%.⁴ WHS enrolls nearly 1275 annually, of which 65% of the students are of Latino/a descent. With the continued growth of the Latino/a population nationally, we can only expect the same growth in Washington City and

³ Observations at WHS on 10/28/11

⁴ <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/25/2530840.html>

inevitably, at WHS. The underrepresentation of Latino/a students in the AP and Honors tracks have tremendous implications for the future of a city that has nearly 30% of its residents living in poverty. When looking at tracking specifically, it is clear that the policy of separating students by achievement or perceived ability, while advantageous for those in the higher tracks, systematically provides inferior pedagogy, restricted educational opportunities and low self-esteem for others.⁵ Similar to Lucko, Jeannie Oakes reached a similar conclusion. Oakes claims that tracking seems to work for those who are in the higher tracks, but “retards” the academic progress of the 60% percent who are in the lower tracks.⁶ According to faculty members and both current and former students at WHS, more Latinos/as are enrolling in AP and Honors classes, but the enrollment numbers of Latinos/as in the higher tracks, remain far from impressive.

On a broad scale, according to the 2010 Census, “The Hispanic population increased by 15.2 million between 2000 and 2010, accounting for over half of the 27.3 million increase in the total population in the United States. Between 2000 and 2010, the Hispanic population grew by 43 percent, which was four times the growth in the total population at 10 percent.”⁷ The reality of the United States is that the Latino/a population is the fastest growing population. If more Latino/a students are not educated about their underrepresentation and the implications of being enrolled in certain classes, the enrollment numbers will remain low and history will only

⁵ Lucko, J. (2011). Tracking Identity: Academic Performance and Ethnic Identity among Ecuadorian Immigrant Teenagers in Madrid. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 42(3), 213-29.

⁶ Oakes, Jeannie. 1986. Keeping Track: Part 1 and 2 in *Phi Delta Kappan Journal* v. 68.

⁷ <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-04.pdf>

continue to repeat itself. We must motivate and challenge Latino/a students to challenge the status quo and not be satisfied with just “getting through high school”.

Literature Review

As stated, my research questions are: What has been the experience both socially and academically of the Latino/a student population in different tracks at Washington High School? Are Latino/a students aware they are being tracked? Are these students aware of the implications of tracking? Jennifer Lucko, of Dominican University of California examines the relationship of academic tracking and ethnic identity in her ethnographic work with working-class Ecuadorian students in Madrid, Spain. Lucko explores the correlation between race, ethnicity and tracking and wants to know how tracking affects the students’ experience and whether or not tracking has effects on students’ future educational and professional possibilities. She argues that Ecuadorian students are “tracked” both socially and academically, how teachers often have low expectations and that by being tracked, students futures are determined. Lucko also takes a deeper look into poverty, politics, religion and racism, which I did not focus on in my study at Washington High School, but can be seen as recommendations for avenues to be explored in future studies. Putting the educational experience into context, these factors appear to be pivotal, but I look to focus simply on the experience of Latino/a students in terms of their experience, both academically and socially, while being enrolled in different level classes. The research by Lucko also focuses on immigrants, which lends a closer lens to the ways in which the Spanish perceive immigrants, whereas my research does not seek to research students based on immigrant status. Although Lucko’s research is based in the

Spanish educational system, it is linked to education in the United States due to the similarity in which school policies play a crucial role in a student's educational experience and have implications for students' future.

In *Hopeful Girls, Troubled Boys: Race and Gender Disparity in Urban Education*, Nancy Lopez dedicates the chapter 2, "From Mamasita' to Hoodlum': Stigma as Lived Experience" to a gender and race-based analysis of the stigmas and stereotypes that impact the educational experience of young Caribbean men and women in New York City. Lopez looks at many of the social implications and interpersonal relationships that are developed in public spaces. Lopez examines the impact of Caribbean youth interactions in schools, with neighborhood residents, police, storeowners and many others, which allow youth to create an awareness of the race-gender stigmas that are prevalent in their everyday lives. Lopez also takes a deeper look at immigration, while defining race on both micro and macro levels. The author also explains how the meaning of race and gender are constantly being created and recreated through popular culture, state policies, laws and social interactions, which helps provide an explanation for the racial divide that is evident at WHS. Lopez's ability to gain rapport with students and gain insight to their true feelings about their educational experience is where the study at WHS finds commonality. From this research, I focus on Lopez's findings on how students used different mechanisms such as the use of a "White-sounding voice" in order to gain acceptance.⁸ This is a theme that is relevant to my study at WHS. Latino/a students often feel the need to be more

⁸ Lopez, N. (2003). "From Mamasita' to Hoodlum': Stigma as a Lived Experience." In *Hopeful Girls, Troubled Boys*. New York: Routledge. 15-38.

“proper”, “behaved” and “studious”, by putting on an act by using a “White-sounding voice”, which is a mechanism to validate their position and defy the negative stereotypes that surround the Latino/a population in Washington City. Although Lopez’ research does not focus on tracking, the stereotypes that surround these Caribbean men and women with drugs and teen pregnancy are the same stereotypes that surround Hispanic students at WHS. Her evaluation of the ways in which students construct an identity within American urban schools, and use different methods in order to achieve academic success and social acceptance, are useful in my study at WHS.

Jeannie Oakes, who has done a wealth of research on student tracking and lends a great contribution to the understanding of the history of student tracking, as well as its short and long term implications. In her 2nd edition of *Keeping Track*, Oakes is able to study the current state of student tracking in America, while using her past research to compare the changes.¹ The fact remains that the enrollment in higher and lower tracks yields different educational experiences for students and inevitably presents different educational opportunities in the future. Oakes explores the different behaviors and attitudes students may exhibit as a result of tracking, which is of great importance in my study at Washington High School. According to Oakes, opportunity and exposure to the different tracks continues to shape students’ educational experience. These opportunities create boundaries for these students which have important implications for a student’s future. Oakes also focuses on different racial groups, exploring the enrollment rates and attitudes of both, students and the community at large. Compared to their peers, Oakes found that poor and minority students remain

disproportionately enrolled in the lower tracks. Why has nothing changed in the past 25 years since Jeannie Oakes 1st edition of *Keeping Track*?

In her work on tracking and high school English learners, Rebecca Callahan researched a Northern California rural high school, in which 32% of the 2,000 student population spoke a language other than English at home.⁹ Of this 32%, 89% of them spoke Spanish at home. In her research, she lends a focus on the growing number of students in the United States who speak a language other than English at home and how tracking of these English language learners result in lack of access to high-quality content-area instruction. This lack of instruction, has linguistic, academic and programmatic consequences. To go along with the less rigorous instruction provided for these students, Callahan also explores the expectations teachers have of these students. Callahan cites both Jeannie Oakes (1985) and Angela Valenzuela (1999) in observing a lack of respect and understanding in low-track classrooms, which contributes to students' sense of alienation and isolation. She also explains how different states have different standards for English learners to be eligible to move out of these tracks into English-proficient classes, but strict policies often create a class of English learners that are never able to exit these programs. WHS has a 65% Latino/a student population, of which 44% of the total student population English is not their first language.¹⁰ I use her research to possibly provide an explanation of how students who do not speak English fluently at WHS are essentially tracked

⁹ Callahan, Rebecca M. (2005). *Tracking and High School English Learners: Limiting Opportunity to Learn in American Education Research Journal Vol. 42, No.2.* American Educational Research Association. 305-328

¹⁰ <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=01370505&orgtypecode=6&leftNavId=305&>

socially as well, which can further explain the racial divide and stereotypes that surround this group at WHS.

Do students have the option to move in and out of tracks during the high school career? In her video, *Off Track: Classroom Privilege for All*, Michelle Fine documents an integrated school in New York City in which “detracking” is used and students from different tracks were enrolled in the same class. Fine explores the different methods of pedagogy that were used in the various tracks, such as group work and collaboration, while students were given individualized attention to learn at the highest levels.¹¹ The purpose of this documentation is to examine the possibilities of detracked class, but also shedding light on the failure of tracking; lacking the evaluation of students in lower tracks who are capable of succeeding in higher tracked classes. One of the questions Fine presents is: “Is there a division between White kids and minorities?”, which is one of the avenues I explore in my study at WHS. I also explore the opportunities for mobility by interviewing teachers and the academic coordinator at WHS, as well as exploring students’ knowledge of their opportunities for mobility.

My study at Washington High School hopes to yield findings that can be shared with the students and parents at WHS and possibly the Washington City community as a whole; educating them on the history of tracking and its continued implications for attainment of higher education. As in the study by Lucko, this study looks to explore the correlation between race, ethnicity and tracking, but does not wish to focus on those who abandon academic and

¹¹ Fine, M., & Teachers College (New York, N.Y.). (1998). *Off track: Classroom privilege for all*. New York, N.Y: Teachers College.

professional ambitions. My study at WHS seeks to examine how Latino/a students feel in these “college-bound” and standard classes, while sharing some of their personal experiences, both socially and academically. Lucko sheds light on the peer role in the educational experience and I hope to do the same. Research has shown that students who have high aspirations often use different mechanisms, such as “sounding white” in order to help them succeed (Lopez 2003). The opportunity and exposure theory used by Oakes is an intricate part of the study at WHS as I seek to familiarize students with their options of track mobility. Unlike the other studies that have been mentioned, this study seeks to reach out to the faculty and administrators on the current classroom and school climate, which will hopefully invoke some type of action that can engage more students in the classroom, motivating more Latino/a students to challenge themselves and consciously enroll in college-bound classes.

Methodology

This study uses one on one interviews, a focus group and observations to collect primary data. Interviews were conducted with both former and current Latino/a students, teachers and the academic coordinator at WHS. A total of 17 student interviews were conducted (7 former, 10 current), 2 teacher interviews and 1 academic coordinator. Observations during a one month period (once per week) and observations over a semester long period (once per week) were made of 8 (2 Standard, 3 Honors and 3 AP) different English classes and 3 (2 Standard and 1 Honors) different science classes, to gain insight on the current classroom climate in various tracks, while also establishing a rapport with current students with whom I wish to share my findings. The English classes were all taught by Mr. Crown, who was interviewed. Mrs. Lee

taught Biology in 1 of the science classes that I observed and she was also interviewed. I also observed science classes that were taught by Mrs. Davis and Ms. Donald, whom both taught Chemistry. Throughout my observations, detailed field notes were taken of the interactions between teachers and students, and peer-peer interactions. I also took note of the informal conversations that took place between students and myself.

Selecting current students to interview was a difficult process. I tried my best to step out of my comfort zone and interview both athletes and non-athletes, as well as familiar and not so familiar students. Once I selected the current students to interview, they were given parental consent forms that explained the nature of the study and the motive for performing the research. As for the former students, I attempted to have a group of well-rounded interviewees who are involved with a variety of things since their careers at WHS. These interviewees were given a verbal explanation of what the study was about and they were able to ask questions that would address any doubts or concerns that they were feeling. Interviews with former students were done both in person and some were sent the questions via email. Originally, the in person interviews were scheduled to take about 20-30 minutes, but seeing that the questions were of great significance and interesting to the interviewees, the interviews usually lasted over an hour. The students were asked questions relating to what it means to be Latino/a, what classes they are/were enrolled in, how they feel/felt in these classrooms, as well as their thoughts on how their peers perceive/perceived them. I also incorporated different terms that are specific to the WHS context and got an array of reactions. (Appendix A). I recorded interviews and focus group discussions on a tape recorder and transcribed them after

the interviews. The faculty members were asked questions about who determined which tracks students were placed in, if they felt race had any bearing on these decisions, and whether or not students had options of mobility once they were in a specific track. These interviews lasted around 30 minutes and they were sent the questions via email to provide time to elaborate on their perceptions. Pseudonyms are used for the school, the teachers and the students involved in this study.

Context

WHS is located in a small city in Massachusetts with a population closing in on 40,000 people. Washington has always been a city of working class immigrants, starting in the 1950s. In the last decade, Washington has seen an increase in crime rate and has the highest teen pregnancy rate in the state.¹² Although these negative statistics fill the media, locally and at a state level, Washington is home to important history and is resided by some of the most loyal, proud and welcoming people to be found in any community in America.¹³ With reflections of both suburban and urban neighborhoods, Washington is a diverse city, with nearly thirty percent of its residents living below the poverty line. The combination of diversity, high teen pregnancy rate and impoverished status serves as a basis for many negative stereotypes that surround the Washington community, specifically the Latino/a population. These stereotypes strongly affect how social relations are formed in the community and in the schools.

As I walk the halls of Washington High School on the morning of Friday November, 18th I can only help but notice the diversity that Washington is known for. Students from all

¹² http://www.masslive.com/news/index.ssf/2010/04/teen_pregnancy_rate_drops_in_s.html

¹³ http://www.holycham.com/holyoke/downtown_holyoke.aspx

backgrounds gather at their lockers and socialize in preparation for another day, and completing another week. As I look around, students and faculty members proudly don the school colors of purple and white, showcasing school spirit and providing a sense of community. Upon entering Mr. Crown's homeroom, students begin to fill the classroom, sit at their designated desks, and patiently await today's announcements. As I observe the classroom, I locate the school's mission statement, which reads: "Washington High School's vision is to ensure that all students are provided the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to graduate prepared to pursue higher education without remediation and/or a rewarding career and to function as responsible citizens in a diverse society." The bell rings and announcements are delivered over the loud speaker. Announcements include: Winter Coat Drive, The Pep Rally Dance, Business Club Meeting, University and College Visits, Winter Sports Tryouts and finally, Hispanic Month Events. The announcer ends announcements with the daily quote by Mark Twain, "Always do great. This will gratify most and astonish the rest."

Thesis

I argue that the experience of Latinos/as in the higher tracks (AP/Honors) has been a daunting, stressful and often intimidating experience with hope of it being beneficial down the road, while Latinos/as in the standard tracks feel more at ease and demonstrate an unawareness of the future implications of being in these less demanding classes. I also argue that involvement in sports has helped Latino/a students decrease the pressure in the environment of the higher tracks, while having Latino/a role models and the feeling of wanting to represent Latinos/as in a positive light; motivates these to defy the negative assumptions and stereotypes that surround the Latino/a population and forge pathways for others.

Analysis and Interpretation

Teacher and Academic Coordinator Interviews: (Appendix B, C and D)

Observing these different classes, I needed to know more about the tracking process at WHS. In interviewing two teachers and the academic coordinator, a concrete understanding of the process of tracking at WHS was explained. The first thing that needed to be addressed was “How is tracking determined and by whom?” Mrs. Lee responded to this question by saying, “As subject teachers, we recommend what course and level the student should take the following year.”¹⁴ Although dealing with younger students in a different context, Deborah Meier discusses this concept in her book *In Schools We Trust* as she talks about how educators must genuinely get to know students in order to legitimately evaluate them, which is crucial in the “tracking” process. Meier says:

“For example, for some kids *pin* and *pen* made the same sound, although they had different meanings and different spellings. I didn’t get it right away, but these differences made some teachers see such kids as hearing-impaired or not paying attention or inattentive to sounds. These teachers recommended special ed classes for these kids.” (143)¹⁵

Both Mrs. Smith and Mr. Crown expressed the involvement in student mobility. This possibility of mobility gives students the opportunity to set goals and challenge themselves. This option of mobility also gives parents an opportunity to be directly involved with their child’s education, which may cause some friction between the three parties if they do not share the same feelings. Mrs. Lee also expanded on this by saying that in her experience at WHS, she has found that it has been white and middle class parents that have shown this type of interest. She also added

¹⁴ Interview with Mrs. Lee on April 29, 2011. (Appendix B)

¹⁵ Meier, Deborah. (2003). *In Schools We Trust: Creating Communities of Learning in an Era of Testing and Standardization*. Beacon Press.

that the parents are usually pushing for their child to be placed into the Honors level classes, which shows their awareness of the implications of enrolling in such classes. We have seen this in Jeannie Oakes *Keeping Track* as she discusses the cultural and socioeconomic patterns that interfere with the educational experience of poor and minority students have.¹ Mr. Crown responded to this question by giving some insight on the naming of the classes. Mr. Crown said, "A few years back, the Principal and Faculty Senate decided to do away w/ "Survey" or basic level classes...By linking the survey with the standard classes, it was felt that we'd be encouraging kids to work harder and to expect more."¹⁶ The school system decided to raise the expectations of the students and possibly encouraging them by changing the name of the level of classes. Students now have more of a sense of pride and do not have the pressure of being stigmatized as a "dummy".

One of the next questions that I found to be relevant to tracking at WHS was: "In your experience, have you found that race or class has had any bearing on the enrolment of students in the different tracks?" Mr. Crown attacked this question quite well. He said, "The upper level classes tend to be more white, especially the AP classes. But that has changed over the past few years. Minority enrollment in my AP classes has increased noticeably and a lot of that has to do with encouragement from teachers and guidance counselors."²² Mrs. Smith also concluded that although the majority of the upper classes tend to be filled with white students, she has seen an increase in enrollment by minority students due to faculty members and guidance

¹⁶ Interview with Mr. Crown (Appendix C)

counselors challenging students to not “take the easy way out”¹⁷ Mrs. Lee had an interesting take on this question. She explained:

“Many times it is the white upper middle class family that is more in tune with what is going on in the school system and how to maneuver some of the road blocks they may encounter... There can sometimes be the attitude of entitlement of both the parent and their child... Many times students who sign up for AP or Honors classes and should NOT be in the course. They enroll because their friends do, parent wants them in the class (to be with the so-called “Good Kids”), or it’s a status issue.”

Why do white, middle class parents feel that they have this sense of entitlement? Does this “entitlement” stem from the concepts of Annette Lareau’s *Concerted Cultivation*? Lareau discusses the importance of childrearing and the institutional advantages that are produced due to the type of childrearing that takes place in a middle-class home. Parents often invest more time talking to their children, leading to their development of greater verbal agility, larger vocabularies, more comfort with authority figures and more familiarity with abstract concepts.¹⁸ Interestingly enough, Mr. Crown expressed his feelings of this sort of language barrier in his response. He said, “It’s not language or skin color; it’s environment and social expectations, which feeds into a low self-image often masked by “toughness” (a real defense mechanism) and a willingness to settle for less than the best”²² In Mr. Crown’s time at WHS, as a football coach and the Head of the English department, he has crossed paths with many students, especially Latino/a students that perform at high levels; he believes the social atmosphere has the biggest influence on student achievement. He believes that with more positive encouragement from the faculty, and positive role models, referencing a Latina student

¹⁷ Interview with Mrs. Smith (Appendix D)

¹⁸ Lareau, Annette.(2003). *Unequal Childhoods: Race, Class, and Family Life*. University of California Press.

who was valedictorian in 2000, “our” minority students are becoming less fearful of attempting and succeeding in these upper level courses.

Lastly, I asked the faculty members to express their personal feelings about student tracking in which Mrs. Lee, Mrs. Smith and Mr. Crown all expressed their support for student tracking. Mrs. Smith stated that she thought student tracking was beneficial because it challenged students by having this kind of “tier” system. Both Mrs. Lee and Mr. Crown expressed that the mixing of lower ability students with higher ability kids does not work and is a disservice to the students. Mrs. Lee said, “You need tracking in order to teach information at a level that is challenging and attainable by all students so that they all have the opportunity to achieve.”²⁰ Mr. Crown brought up an interesting fact about WHS and how it has dealt with the increase of enrollment in the higher level classes. He said, “We did lower our standards to get into AP English, primarily to encourage more kids to try it. We used to limit the class to 15 kids, and it was based on B average or better in Honors or above; teacher’s recommendation; and a blind writing sample. Now it’s just an average of a B and a teacher’s recommendation.”²² Mr. Crown feels that although they have increased their minority and total enrollment, he feels the school has recreated its old system when it had survey level classes, but just changed the name. He also feels that it could just be part of the process as “we lift everyone”.

Current Student Profiles:

Juanki Torres

Juanki Torres is a very intelligent student-athlete at Washington High School. Juanki currently holds a 3.7 GPA and enrolls in both AP and Honors classes. This year Juanki is enrolled

in 3 total AP classes. Juanki plays football, wrestles and runs Track during the spring. Juanki is fluent in both English and Spanish, and says that both languages are used at home. Juanki says, “Being Latino simply means I’m proud of it, I don’t let it label me in any way shape or form.”¹⁹ When I asked Juanki what he meant by this, he further explained that being a Latino in Washington City came with a lot of pressure because of the negative stereotypes that surround the Latino population in the city. He talked about the “irrational assumptions” of Latinos being “uninformed” and “ghetto” and felt the need to be someone who contradicted these assumptions. He added to this sentiment, “Nonetheless, I am proud of my heritage and culture and see it as part of who I am... I want to represent not only myself, but my family and culture...and hope that I can forge a pathway for others like me to follow.” Through Juanki’s consistent enrollment in the higher level tracks, he provides a great insight and explains how he feels Latinos/as are underrepresented in the tracks. Finally, he says, “It was very intimidating in these classes because I felt out of place and felt pressured to constantly perform well because the weight of the reputation of Hispanics...”. In my observations at WHS, Latino/a students spoke less in the higher tracked classes. This was interesting because I often caught students sharing their opinions to the students next to them, but rarely expressing them to the whole class.²⁰ Overall, Juanki understands the implications of being enrolled in these higher tracked classes and has aspirations of going to college next year. In some informal conversations with

¹⁹ Interview with Juanki Torres on 11/22/11

²⁰ Fieldnotes from observations on 10/28

Mr. Crown, he expresses high expectations for Juanki in the future, saying, “This kid has a lot of potential.”²¹

Teresa Oliveras

Teresa Oliveras is also an exceptional student, but her experience at WHS has been a little different than some of the other students included in this study. Teresa is currently a senior and is enrolled in 2 AP classes, 2 honors classes and an urban literature class that is not traditionally tracked because it is only urban literature class offered. Teresa is enrolled in one of the AP English classes that I observed, but was interviewed in the only focus group that was conducted. Teresa also expressed sentiments of being proud of being Latina, while adding that it was a “way of life” and “who you are”.²² What is interesting about Teresa is that English is not her first language. Teresa explained how she took ESL classes in the earlier years of her career at WHS. It has been quite the journey from the ESL track, to the highest level of English in her senior year. Much of her success, she contributes to her involvement with the Upward Bound program, which provides fundamental support to its participants in their preparation for college entrance. *Upward Bound* serves high school students from low-income families; and high school students from families in which neither parent holds a bachelor's degree.²³ She expresses how it has not been an easy transition and says how she has received criticism from family members at times for “acting white”. She says that her mother always criticizes her for “hanging out with too many white kids.”, but she does not let this discourage her. In her

²¹ Fieldnotes from observations on 10/28

²² Focus group with Teresa Oliveras and David Mercado on 11/21/11

²³ <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/trioupbound/index.html>

current AP English class, she emphasized the fact that “there are only two of us”, which shows the sense of solidarity amongst Latino/a students, as well as their awareness of being underrepresented in the higher level classes. Lastly, Teresa shares her aspirations of going to college and how she is aware that enrolling in these classes has implications on attending institutions of higher education. She says, “They [colleges] look at it... WCC doesn’t count, everyone goes there... but colleges definitely look at what you have taken in high school”. Teresa’s comment about WCC, the local community college, shows her interest in experiencing college outside of Washington City and not becoming a statistic and enrolling in a 2-year institution after graduation (49%).²⁴

Themes

In the interviews with both current and former Latino/a students, there were many themes that were taken from these interviews, showcasing the continuous effects of tracking on the Latino/a student population at WHS.

Pride and Culture

Similar to the sentiments of Juanki and Teresa, many of the students expressed the sense of pride that they felt in what it means to be Latino/a. Former student, Victoria Velez says it best when she says, “Being Latino to me is about pride, it’s about embracing my culture, loving the food my mother cooks for me, the music we dance to, the language that we speak...being able to succeed in life and represent my people.”²⁵ Victoria was enrolled in

²⁴ <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=01370505&orgtypecode=6&leftNavId=307&>

²⁵ Interview with Victoria Velez on 11/28/11

standard level classes in the beginning of her career at WHS, but was recommended by her teachers to enroll in honors classes during her junior and senior years. Current student Andre expresses a sense of solidarity amongst all Latinos/as when he says, “Being Latino means being a part of something more than yourself, but a family. I am very proud of my culture, and I’ve held true to my values and identity...”²⁶ Andre is currently enrolled in honors classes and has aspirations in attending an institution of higher education next year. Overall, Latino/a students at WHS expressed these feelings of pride and culture throughout the interviews, while also feeling the need to stick together and represent Latinos/as in a positive light.

Stereotypes and “Proving them Wrong”

As was expressed by Mr. Crown, the reality in Washington City is that there are many stereotypes about the Latino/a population, which often stigmatize the Latino/a student population. Former student, Joshua Pagan says, “My friends might say that Latino females are always getting pregnant or that males join gangs and do drugs...”²⁷ With the high teen pregnancy rate in Washington City, and many of them being Latina, students must deal with this stigma on a daily basis. Current students Teresa and David, whom are enrolled in one of Mr. Crown’s AP English classes, expressed their feelings on the stereotypes when they said, “Many think Latinos are dumb, loud and ask too many questions... Many have low expectations...”²¹ Both current and former students expressed that their peers have negative perceptions of Latinos/as at WHS, but after discussing this with David and Teresa, they responded, “We’re

²⁶ Interview with Andre Rivera on 11/20/11

²⁷ Interview with Joshua Pagan on 11/21/11

ready to prove them wrong". These sentiments were not only expressed by students who were enrolled in higher tracked classes, students such as Gio, a former standard tracked student, said, "I felt as if I had to prove myself. I feel there is an unconscious stereotype in people that automatically think less of me. I felt like anytime I excelled or showed more drive than others, it was a surprise..."²⁸ The fact remains that Latino/a students feel additional pressure simply because of the stereotypes that surround the Latino/a population, but they continue to do their part in defying these stereotypes and making their White peers aware that these stereotypes are not accurate.

"Acting White"

Although many of their Latino/a peers may have perceived they are "acting white", many of the students who were interviewed expressed how they feel talking proper, being studious and being well behaved is not "acting white", but is used to be recognized as an educated person. Former student, Gio Medina says, "I have to upgrade my vocabulary and prove that I am capable of an intellectual conversation. The same goes for the classroom."²⁷ As Teresa Oliveras, Berto Garcia also expressed the amount of criticism he received from his family members for "acting white". He explained how he was constantly seen as looking down on his family by speaking more proper and shared an anecdotal story of how his stepfather told him, "you think you're better than me or something?"²⁸ The assumption of some of the Latino/a population that talking proper in English is "acting white" must be erased, and they must know

²⁸ Interview with Gio Medina on 12/11/11

that they can eloquently speak in English without losing the pride and culture that comes with being Latino/a.

Aware and Unaware-The Lack of Communication

Although Mr. Crown, Mrs. Lee and Mrs. Smith all shared their optimism for student mobility once they are tracked and students in the higher tracks were well aware of the implications of being in the higher level classes, students in the standard classes expressed an unawareness of the implications of tracking and their options for mobility. Former student Berto says, “I didn’t know that I had the option of moving up if I, but looking back, I know I could’ve done the work... I used to just go to school and get my stuff done and then leave... I had to work, so I just did what I had to do to get by.”²⁹ Berto also mentioned the impact of the lack of interest by his guidance counselor, which he feels had an impact on him not being informed about enrollment options. Berto went on to study at the local community college, eventually transferring to a state university in the area. He is now working on finishing up his masters and is head of the school committee in Washington City. Current student Yamaira, who was in one of Mr. Crown’s standard English classes during my first observations, explains how she feels all it would take is a little extra dedication outside of school in order to do well in an honors class. She also expressed how she thinks many Latino/a students simply are not aware of their ability to talk to their guidance counselor or teachers about possibly moving up.³⁰ This is where I feel this research will best serve Latino/a students at WHS. It is not to say every student

²⁹ Interview with Berto Garcia on 11/19/11

³⁰ Interview with Yamaira Sanchez on 11/4/11

should be moved up into the higher level classes, but this will allow them to be aware of the implications of tracking and to know they have options and can they can take full responsibility of their education.

The Racial Divide- “Lingies”, “Athletes” and the “White Kids”

The term “Lingy”, according to Juanki Torres, “it is undoubtedly a negative term”, while Gio defines it as, “a slang term for a ghetto Hispanic/Latino... It simply means you do not speak English very well and have difficulty communicating without messing up or throwing in some Spanish words where you lack the knowledge of the English equivalent.”²⁷ Throughout my observations in the classrooms, the hallways and the lunch room, the word was used unconsciously and nobody objected to anyone using it. It was accepted, but current student Andre Rivera, feels it is not acceptable. He says, “The word is offensive to me and put me in some sticky situations as I had many White and Hispanic friends use it, which caused many problems.” Andre clearly felt stuck in the middle in these situations because he is friends with the White students as well as the “lingies”, which may affect this racial divide. Former student Victoria Velez says, “There is definitely a racial divide, especially in the lunch room, where you see all the white kids sitting with each other and all the athletes sitting together...”²⁴ During my observations I was able to sit in the cafeteria with the students during lunch and I could only help but notice the racial divide that took place. The majority of the Latino/a students sat at the right side of the cafeteria, while the athletes (racially mixed) sat in the left-rear, and the White students sat in the left-front. Current student Juanki Torres expands on the racial divide and puts it in context with the classroom. He says, “There is a subtle racial divide because Hispanics

and Whites don't usually intermingle freely. Tracking must have an effect on this because Whites are usually in the upper level classes with Hispanics on the other end, causing a split in classes that carries on into the halls."¹⁹ This racial divide that is prevalent in both the classroom and the cafeteria may be as a result of the stereotypes that surround the Latino/a population, as well as the reality of many students not socializing with each other because they do not have classes together; therefore socially isolating some of the student population.

Sports (Bridging the Gap and Hopes)

The few Latino student-athletes that were interviewed in this study expressed how their involvement in sports at WHS allowed them to bridge the gap of the racial divide between the White students and themselves. Former student Carlos Rivera says, "I played sports and I'm an outgoing guy so I was always meeting new people...My social circle was with students of all backgrounds."³¹, while current student Andre Rivera says, "My social circle is predominantly White with a few other Hispanics. But we all have one thing in common and its sports..."²⁵ Sports have helped Latino/a students and White students share a common place, which cannot be said of the classroom, as the higher tracked classrooms I observed had low enrollment of Latino/a students and high enrollment in the standard tracked classes [(AP-24.3%), (Honors-23.5%), (Standard- 65.4%)].³²

Sports also played an increasing role in the enrollment of Latino/a students in higher tracked classes, as they hope it will be benefit them in the future. Andre expands, "I feel like

³¹ Interview with Carlos Rivera on 11/4/11

³² Fieldnote Observations

sports play the biggest role in the enrollment of higher track classes because these kids dream big and know that in order to get into UConn, UMass, and the rest of these dream schools, [enrolling in] higher tracked classes will help.”²⁵ Overall, involvement in sports is helping decrease the tension in the racial divide one student-athlete at a time, while helping increase the number of Latino/a students enrolling in higher tracked classes.

Role Models (“More Latinos Doing Their Thing”)

The final theme that was prevalent in many of the interviews, was the impact of having Latino/a role models that are successfully enrolling in the higher tracked classes and moving on to attend institutions of higher institutions. Carlos Rivera says of more Latino/a students enrolling in higher tracked classes, “I think they are because as time goes by there are young role models that are Latino who are making something of themselves and Latinos are starting to catch on to the fact that anyone can make it .”³⁰ Mr. Crown and Mrs. Lee shared these same observations, as they have noticed that more Latinos/as are enrolling in the higher tracked classes that are offered at WHS. Having someone who you can relate to and look to for advice can make all the difference in the world, which is clear in the case of Carlos Rivera, who is a recent graduate and is now working on his Associates degree, with hopes of being a role model for youth in Washington City.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my study lacked in that I was not able to observe English language learner classes, and although this was only a 4 month study with a small sample group, the interviews of both current and former students demonstrate the experience, both socially and

academically, of Latino/a students at WHS. These interviews also demonstrate an overall unawareness of those students tracked at the standard level. Through observations, it is evident that Latino/a enrollment continues to be low in a school that is predominantly Latino/a, while enrollment in standard classes continues to reflect the total population at WHS. Faculty members focused on encouraging students to challenge themselves and seek their full potential, to expect excellence from the students and lastly, to build students' self-image, rather than to destroy it. The question is: Is every teacher at WHS like Mrs. Lee and Mr. Crown, and genuinely getting to know students and evaluating their "abilities"? We must continue to educate and promote awareness of the implications of student tracking and its effects on poor and minority students, specifically the Latino/a population at WHS. I will be sharing my findings with the Latino/a student population at WHS in the upcoming months in hopes of challenging, encouraging and motivating this underrepresented population to continue to be proud of their culture, defy the stereotypes, bridge the gap of the racial divide, and use sports as a tool to become role models for future youth. In the words of Paulo Freire, "The revolution is made neither by the leaders for the people, nor by the people for the leaders, but by both acting together in unshakable solidarity."³³ By sharing these findings with all faculty members, parents and students of the Washington High School community, and creating an awareness of the implications of tracking not only for Washington City, but for the whole United States; the Washington High School community has the potential of being the beginning of a new revolution.

³³ Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

(Appendix A)**Tracking Research Questionnaire**

- 1) Everyone answering these questions is of Latino/a descent. What does being Latino/a mean to you?
- 2) What does student “tracking” or “ability placement” mean to you? If you’re not sure what it is that is fine too.
- 3) Out of the different tracks that are offered at HHS, which classes were/are you enrolled in? [Standard, Honors or AP]
- 4) As a Latino, how do you feel you were represented in these classes? [Who are/were in these classes? (Latinos/as, African Americans, Whites)]
- 5) Tell me a little about how you felt in these classes.
- 6) By being placed in these certain tracks, do you feel there are certain implications by being in say an AP or Honors class versus being in a standard level class?
- 7) Could you share your thoughts on whether student tracking higher or lowers your chances of attending an institution of higher education?
- 8) When I say something like “acting white” in relation to being in certain classes, what comes to mind? As a Latino, do you feel this is something you need to do?
- 9) How would you define the term “lingy” or “bilingual” in the context of how it is used at HHS? What does this term mean to you?
- 10) How do/did you you perceive the classroom climate and interracial relations?
- 11) Who is/was in your social circle? Do/Did you have friends in other tracks? To what extent do you feel the classes you enroll in effect who your friends are? Explain.
- 12) At HHS, do you feel there is a racial divide? Why or why not? Do you think tracking has an effect on this? Why or why not?
- 13) What kind of perceptions do you feel your peers have/had of Latinos/as?
- 14) The reality at HHS is that Latinos/as (who compose about 65% of the student population) are underrepresented in the “higher” (AP and Honors) tracks. Do you feel more and more Latino/as are enrolling in these higher tracked classes? If so, what are do you think the reasons are? [Are teachers encouraging it? Is it the student’s aspirations? Sports?] How can we try to explain this?

- 15) Lastly, could you share any other feelings you have in terms of being a Latino/a at HHS? Anything that comes to mind about your experience at HHS that you think will contribute to the research being done on the “experience as a Latino/a specifically at HHS”. Please feel free to respond to this in a separate email and just number the responses.

Appendix B (via Email) – Mrs. Lee

1) How is tracking determined? And by whom?

As subject teachers, we recommend what course and level the student should take for the following year. (granted - this can be overridden by the parent). Parents often want their child in an Honors level class even if it is NOT the proper placement (especially parents that are white and middle class).

Teachers

2) In your experience, have you found that race or class has had any bearing on the enrollment of students in the different tracks?

To an extent – I do feel that most Honor/AP classes are white upper middle class students. But we have had an increasing # of minority/Hispanic students taking Honors/AP classes. A lot of this has to do w/ encouragement from their teachers and guidance counselors.

Many times it is the white upper middle class family that is more in tune with what is going on in the school system and how to maneuver some of the road blocks they may encounter. They are a little more savvy and informed in selection of courses and levels for their child. There can sometimes be the attitude of entitlement of both the parent and their child.

Many times students who sign up for AP or Honors classes and should NOT be in the course. They enroll because their friends do, parent wants them in the class (to be with the so-called Good kids), or it’s a status issue (even if it is against teacher recommendation). After a few weeks they find it’s too difficult and they receive a very low grade and the parent wants to blame the teacher (not the fact that the student is misplaced). This causes problems in the watering down of courses that we don’t want to do. (The teacher will either end up flunking a large # of students or lower the teaching standards within the class).

3) Do you feel students have the option of mobility amongst the different tracks? Up or down? And if so, who are the key figures in making these decisions.

No – the mobility that occurs between tracks is usually suggested by the instructor/guidance counselor and it is sometimes requested by the parent. Changing of classes is sometimes very difficult because it could disrupt a student’s entire schedule

and causes class size to change. Many times student switches out or into a class because they dislike or like a particular instructor and use the excuse of the level to get moved. Switching of classes causes great problems in scheduling and class sizes. I feel if a student has the capability of doing Honors or AP work that they should challenge themselves. Often students will opt for the standard class to reduce their work load.

Lastly, please express your personal feelings towards student tracking. [Example: I feel it is very beneficial for students... Etc.

I do believe in tracking. If you had a heterogeneous classroom the High and low levels would be at great extremes. This would be hurting both the high and lower level student. You need tracking in order to teach information at a level that is challenging and attainable by all students so that they all have the opportunity to achieve. I do NOT believe in General or Survey level classes – this becomes a dumping ground for the students with disciplinary problems and it completely lowers the academic standards for the students. At HHS we did away with the survey level classes about 6 years ago and I feel that this was a good decision in mixing the low level students in the standard levels. It has increased the academic standards and reduced disciplinary issues. Whether a school says that they track or not – ultimately it will happen by the types of courses that the student selects. At HHS, I believe that students are first placed in their Math course and from there the track ultimately starts by students being placed and tracked according to levels in all of their classes.

Appendix C (Via Email) – Mr. Crown

A few years back, the Principal and Faculty Senate decided to do away w/ "Survey" or basic level classes. It was felt that all we did was put the "dummies" together, which meant for the most part all the disciplinary problems as well. By linking the survey w/ the standard classes, it was felt that we'd be encouraging kids to work harder, to expect more. For the most part, it has worked. At least kids don't think of themselves as "dummies" as much.

The upper level classes tend to be more white, esp. the AP classes. But that has changed over the past few years. Minority enrollment in my AP classes has increased noticeably, and a lot of that has to do w/ encouragement from teachers and guidance counselors. So much has to do w/ expectations. Let's face it, our average Hispanic kid is NOT Harry Melendez or Antonio Diaz. Too many of them have such low expectations for their lives. And I don't believe it is cultural at all; it is much more social. For someone to simply think "Puerto Ricans are just lazy" is, first of all, wrong, but, more importantly, misses the real point. It's not language or skin color; it's environment and social expectations, which feeds into a low self image often masked by "toughness" (a real defense mechanism), and a willingness to settle for less than the best. But, as I said, w/ positive encouragement, and w/ developing role models like yourself, Rice, Antonio, Yesenia Nazario (Valedic. in 2000), our minority kids are becoming less fearful of attempting upper level courses. Students may move up or down one level, but, except in a rare exception,

they may not jump two levels (std. to AP). Again, the student, the parents, the teacher, and guidance counselor are all involved to a degree in the decision. Each spring, for ex, we as teachers are asked to recommend students who we think should be in a different level. I always encourage standard kids who I think are not being challenged to move up the next year. I have a std. girl (soph.) this year who has AP smarts. In order to take AP as a senior, she needs to move up to Honors for next year, and I have strongly recommended this.

I have always been a fan of tracking, as long as we avoid "labeling" the lowest level kids. For ex, I was and am all for the aboliton of survey level. It was a good move, even if just for the "sound" of it..."I take standard level classes" allows a kid some self dignity. Plus, academically, the levels weren't that much different. But to mix in lower ability kids w/ AP levels doesn't work. Been there, done that...You end up either flunking a lot of kids or dummying down your lessons. There is a world of difference between my AP, which is taught as a freshman college seminar, and a senior standard class. One thing to note, and I'm still sorting out how I feel about it, is the fact that we did lower our standards to get into AP English, primarily to encourage more kids to try it. We used to limit the class to 15 kids, and it was based on a B avg. or better in Honors or above; teacher's rec.; and a blind writing sample graded by selected English teachers w/out the kid's name (used numbers instead). Now it's just B or above and teacher's rec. It has increased the numbers of AP students, and, collaterally, increased the number of minority kids in those classes (27 students, split into two classes, w/ 6 minority kids this year). But, as a side effect, in a sense we have re-created our old system, when we had no AP, just Honors, std., and survey. I have noticed, for ex, a "watering down" of ability in my honors class. But, maybe that's just part of the process as we lift everyone. As I said, I'm still sorting out my feelings there.

I guess in general what's important is to encourage, to expect excellence, to build students' self-image rather than destroy it. And I feel tracking allows for just that for all students. It gives a lower level kid a goal to strive harder to take upper level classes. At the same time, it doesn't slow down the progress of gifted students by forcing them to be in a class w/ kids who just don't care, and whose indifference negatively affects the education of the bright kids. We don't want to leave any child behind, but, if you gear everything to the caboose, the engine will die. Tracking, I feel, allows our school to cater to the needs of all students.

Appendix D (In person) – Mrs. Smith (Did not submit a response via email)

How is tracking determined and by whom?

-It is not exactly labeled, but we do have labels. It is determined by teacher recommendations, and parents and students do have a say in what "track" they are put into. I always advise students, "Don't take the easy way out"

In your experience, have you found that race or class has had any bearing on the enrollment of students in the different tracks?

- At WHS it is hard to say. (Really indirect answer) She described how there were 90 students taking any type of AP exam this year (which is required of AP students) and

only 35% of them were “non-white”. She also said that these numbers have risen in the past couple of years.

Please express your personal feelings towards student tracking. [Example: I feel it is very beneficial for students... Etc.

- Mrs. Smith said the biggest thing about this kind of labeling is that we must continue to challenge the students a daily basis. On a personal level she said it would only benefit the school to have more minorities enrolled in the higher level schools so she would only continue to encourage and support it if it is in the students’ best interest.

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