



The Other Side of the Tracks: How Academic Streaming Impacts Student Relationships

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Abstract: While the inequitable academic impacts of curricular tracking are well understood, less attention has been paid to its social impacts. Utilizing focus groups and in-depth interviews with students and parents in a low-income neighbourhood in Toronto, Canada, this paper uses social identity theory to explore how tracking impacts the nature of relationships between students in different tracks. Findings include that tracking contributed to widening social divides between students, working to replicate and reinforce social stratification, with negative consequences falling most heavily on those assigned to lower tracks. Students formed friendships primarily with same-track peers, while negative stereotyping and bullying across tracks was common. Tracking also increased racial divisions, which led to geographic segregation and schools becoming a

racially divided space.

Keywords: tracking; academic streaming; social identity theory

El otro lado de la división de grupos (en base a aptitudes): Cómo la clasificación académica afecta las relaciones entre los alumnos

Resumen: Si bien se ha comprendido el impacto de la desigualdad académica que la división de los alumnos en grupos (de acuerdo a su nivel de aptitudes) ha tenido, poca atención se le ha puesto a su impacto social. Utilizando grupos focales y entrevistas a profundidad con alumnos y padres de familia en un vecindario de bajos ingresos en Toronto, Canadá; este documento usa la teoría de identidad social para explorar cómo esta clasificación en grupos impacta la naturaleza de las relaciones entre los estudiantes de diversas agrupaciones. Los hallazgos incluyen que esta división ha contribuido a acentuar la división social entre el alumnado; contribuyendo a la réplica y el refuerzo de la estratificación social con negativas consecuencias que recaen más en aquellos asignados a grupos de aptitudes más bajas. Las juventudes formaron amistades principalmente con compañeros en el mismo grupo, al mismo tiempo que los estereotipos negativos y la intimidación entre éstos fueron comunes. La división en agrupaciones también acrecentó las divisiones raciales, lo que llevó a la segregación geográfica y a que las escuelas se convirtieran en un espacio racialmente dividido.

Palabras-clave: grupos de aptitudes; ramas académicas; teoría de identidad social

O outro lado da divisão do grupo (com base na aptidão): Como a classificação acadêmica afeta os relacionamentos dos alunos

Resumo: Apesar do impacto da desigualdade acadêmica que a divisão dos alunos em grupos (de acordo com seu nível de habilidade), pouca atenção tem sido dada ao seu impacto social. Usando grupos focais e entrevistas em profundidade com alunos e pais em um bairro de baixa renda em Toronto, Canadá; Este artigo usa a teoria da identidade social para explorar como esse agrupamento afeta a natureza das relações entre alunos de diversos agrupamentos. Os achados incluem que essa divisão tem contribuído para acentuar a divisão social entre o corpo discente; contribuindo para a replicação e reforço da estratificação social com consequências negativas que recaem mais fortemente sobre aqueles atribuídos a grupos de menor aptidão. Os jovens formaram amizades principalmente com colegas do mesmo grupo, enquanto os estereótipos negativos e o bullying entre os colegas eram comuns. A divisão em clusters também aprofundou as divisões raciais, levando à segregação geográfica e às escolas tornando-se um espaço racialmente dividido.

Palavras-chave: grupos de habilidades; ramos acadêmicos; teoria da identidade social

The Other Side of the Tracks: How Academic Streaming Impacts Student Relationships

Academic streaming or tracking is the practice of dividing students into different instructional groups based on perceived ability or interest. Much research has explored the negative academic effects of tracking, particular on those assigned to ‘lower’ tracks. In Canada, these tracks tend to contain disproportionate amounts of Black and Indigenous students (Clandfield et al., 2014). On that basis, the Canadian province of Ontario recently pledged to end tracking in the first year of high school, calling it “racist” and “discriminatory” (Rushowy, 2020).

Tracking policies have been in place in Canada and other developed countries for several decades, despite studies that have consistently found that the practice has negative effects on the academic achievement of those assigned to 'lower' tracks (Chmielewski, 2014; Clandfield et al., 2014; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Francis & Darity, 2021; Gamoran, 1992a; Hallinan, 1994; Oakes, 2005; Page, 1991). Teachers prefer to teach students in 'higher' tracks (Stevens & Vermeersch, 2010) and tend to lower expectations when teaching those in lower tracks (Oakes & Guiton, 1995).

While the inequitable academic impacts of tracking are well understood, less attention has been paid to the social impacts of tracking. Tracking replicates and reinforces patterns of social stratification, dividing students based on income, race, and ethnicity (Ballarino & Panichella, 2016, 2016; Kao & Thompson, 2003; Oakes & Wells, 2004; Parekh et al., 2011; Reichelt et al., 2019). This has consequences for social relations within schools as students are more likely to form friendships with peers within the same track (Crosnoe, 2000; Gamoran, 1992a; Kubitschek & Hallinan, 1998). This paper explores how academic tracking policies contribute to social divides between students, working to replicate and reinforce social stratification, with negative consequences falling most heavily on those assigned to lower tracks. This paper contributes to the literature on academic tracking by addressing the following research question: How does tracking affect the nature of social relationships among students?

Data for this paper comes from a larger study that examined youth experiences with academic tracking in a low-income neighbourhood in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Focus groups and in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 students and six parents from six different schools in the Toronto East community.

Literature Review

The practice of tracking has been occurring in Canada and other developed countries for decades. Although educational research supports de-tracking, or at least delaying tracking until later grades for the benefit of students (Bauer & Riphahn, 2006; Canaan, 2020; Carbonaro, 2005; Curtis et al., 1992; Krahn & Taylor, 2007; Oakes, 2005), the current reality is that tracking continues to exist throughout a young person's educational career and can both formally and informally occur as early as elementary school (Clandfield et al., 2014; McGillicuddy & Devine, 2018; Parsons & Hallam, 2014). While the terms used to define various forms of tracking are not consistent across diverse contexts, the practice of dividing students based on perceived academic ability, and the impact of this practice on children and youth, shares similarities across countries (Brunello & Checchi, 2007).

In Ontario, tracking begins informally in elementary school through specialized programs like French immersion and special education withdrawal. At the secondary school level, the process is more formalized through "academic" courses, which prepare students for university versus "applied" and "essentials/locally developed" classes which largely do not (for example, see Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p.11). Even in education systems that do not formally practice tracking (i.e. all students are purportedly taught the same curriculum), ability grouping can still occur in which "strong" students are separated from those perceived to be less capable of learning (Gamoran, 1992b; Tieso, 2003). Beyond course and class-based separations, academic tracking may occur at the level of the school-building. In a number of countries, including within Europe and Asia, there are entire schools that focus on vocational preparation where university preparation courses are not offered (Chmielewski, 2014).

Studies consistently find that tracking has negative effects on academic achievement for low-track students (Chmielewski, 2014; Clandfield et al., 2014; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Francis & Darity, 2021; Gamoran, 1992b; Hallinan, 1994; Oakes, 2005; Page, 1991). In Ontario, a 2006 study by the Toronto District School Board found that 93% of students taking academic courses successfully

completed grade 9, compared to 65% enrolled in applied, and only 51% taking essentials level courses (Brown, 2006). More recently, a 2012 study found that from 2006 to 2011 two-thirds of all students who dropped out of secondary school had been placed in lower academic tracks; these same students also came from families representing the lowest income decile (Clandfield et al., 2014, p. 79). Moreover, it has been shown that students in higher tracks have benefited when their school is de-tracked. For example, an in-depth study of de-tracking in Rockville, USA, found that all students - whether originally in advanced or basic tracks - benefited academically when tracking was removed altogether (Burriss & Welner, 2005).

Academic tracking replicates and reinforces patterns of social stratification, dividing students based on income, race, and ethnicity (Ballarino & Panichella, 2016; Kao & Thompson, 2003; Oakes & Wells, 2004; Parekh et al., 2011; Reichelt et al., 2019). Certain students are systematically tracked away from academic opportunities without their knowledge or desire for this to occur. In Canada, low-income and racialized students are greatly over-represented in lower tracks (Clandfield et al., 2014). Conversely, higher-income, white students, and students with parents who have a university education are over-represented within the advanced tracks and within quality educational programs (Clandfield et al., 2014; Parekh et al., 2011).

Evidence shows that teachers' expectations have a substantial impact on student performance (Jussim & Harber, 2005; Wigfield et al., 2015), and that teachers of low-income, working class, and racialized students often hold learning expectations that are far below those of their more affluent peers (de Boer et al., 2018; Glock et al., 2012; Muenks et al., 2018; Stevens & Vermeersch, 2010). The impact of low expectations is exacerbated within the tracking process. Investigation into differences between staff-culture among various tracks shows that teachers perceive students in academic tracks as more teachable compared to their applied-tracked peers (Stevens & Vermeersch, 2010).

Research has debunked commonly held notions that students choose less academic tracks due to an interest in vocational careers (Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Stevens & Vermeersch, 2010). Rather, it has been shown that student choice is attributed to their perception that they may not be successful in academic programs. Vocational education is perceived by both students and staff oftentimes as the "dustbin" (Stevens & Vermeersch, 2010, p. 271) of the educational process - the final stop for those who cannot be or are not motivated to pursue valued educational goals. Beyond fear of failure, in many cases students do not understand the implications of track choice, and the lack of mobility inherent in track placement.

Parental involvement plays a major role in shaping the political and legislative landscape of schooling (Lyken-Segosebe & Hinz, 2015). It has been argued that despite its known negative impact, tracking continues to exist due to advocacy from middle class and affluent parents who pressure schools to implement tracking while ensuring their child is placed in higher tracks (McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999). Socio-economically privileged parents have access to the knowledge and networks necessary to exert influence on schools and school boards, for example by threatening to remove their children from public education either to other districts or into private schools. This threat of 'bright flight' has been shown to occur when schools remove tracks (Kariya & Rosenbaum, 1999). Not only do these parents hope for higher quality, exclusive tracks, they also desire for their children to only mingle with certain "types" of other children. O'Shaughnessy (2007) defines parental selection of schools based on the "quality" of students their children will be exposed to as "peer effects" (p. 501). Peer effects help to explain why such parents favour tracking systems and why these systems operate to the advantage of their children and their affluent peers (Brantlinger et al., 1996; Crozier, 1997; McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999).

Tracking influences students' peer groups and attitudes regarding their classmates, which reinforces racial and class divisions. Students are more likely to form friendships with peers within

the same track (Crosnoe, 2000; Gamoran, 1992a; Kubitschek & Hallinan, 1998). Since lower-class and certain racialized students are overrepresented in less academic tracks, interaction among diverse ethnic and class-based groups is discouraged by tracking (Hallinan, 1994). Moreover, the stigmatization and alienation of lower tracked students is thought to have a negative impact on their academic performance and self-esteem (Hallinan, 1994), which serves to further solidify these groupings.

Policy Context

The history of academic tracking in the province of Ontario goes back decades. In the 1940s, all Ontario high school students learned a common curriculum of English, Latin, French, mathematics, science, geography, history, and physical education. However, success rates were dismal. Over half of all students dropped out by age 16 and only 13% completed their final year of high school (Gidney, 1999). According to educational progressives at the time, the problem was that the traditional curriculum was unappealing to all but a select few. Calls emerged for greater diversity and choice to better engage students.

In the 1960s, the Ontario government introduced three different types of high school program: Arts and Science; Business and Commerce; Science, Technology, and Trades. Within each of these programs, students had the option to enroll in a: five-year branch (to prepare those students considered to be the most academically able for post-secondary education); a four-year branch (for students considered to be of average ability); and a two-year branch (to prepare students considered to be of low ability for direct entry into the labour market). While these changes helped to retain more students in school, they also produced sharp segregation between tracks that worked to replicate broader social hierarchies. For example, students in five-year Arts and Science programs were disproportionately from upper-income families, whereas students in four-year and two-year Business and Commerce, or Science, Technology and Trades programs were predominantly from low-income or immigrant families (Gidney, 1999).

In the 1970s, Ontario introduced a credit system whereby instead of a prescribed slate of courses for each track, students could take courses in four different areas (communications, social and environmental studies, pure and applied sciences, and arts) at one of four academic levels: modified (skills-oriented), basic, general, and advanced (Davis & Ryan, 1980). In explaining its rationale, Ontario's Ministry of Education stated it was attempting to allow more students to "pursue a program suited to his or her individual needs and aspirations" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1979, p. 4). Despite attempting to better meet student needs, large numbers continued to be disengaged. A government roundtable found that a third of students were still dropping out of high school and assessments indicated that mathematics and reading proficiency were decreasing (Ontario Premier's Council, 1988).

The Ontario government thus commissioned a report on the "relevance of education and the issue of dropouts" (Radwanski, 1987). The report found that while only 12% of students in the advanced track left before achieving graduation, 62% of students in the general track and 79% of students in the basic track failed to finish high school. As a result, the report recommended de-tracking high schools and putting in place a common, academically oriented curriculum that would be taught to students of all abilities. As a first step towards this goal, in 1992, the progressive government of Bob Rae announced that students in their first year of high school (Grade 9) would no longer be tracked into different academic levels. The change was criticized by teacher and parent groups who claimed that it was unrealistic to effectively teach students of widely different abilities

together in the same classroom and that high-achieving students were getting shortchanged in the process (Daly, 1993; Walker, 1992).

Shortly after the provincial election in 1997, the new conservative government of Mike Harris announced that tracking would return to Grade 9, but with some modifications. Instead of locking students into a track based on their perceived ability for their entire high school careers, students would now be placed into tracks based on their own interests, and would be able to easily switch between tracks at their own discretion (Small & Gerard, 1997). These tracks would later come to be known as “pathways” and is the system currently in place in Ontario high schools. Under the pathway system, students in Grades 9 and 10 choose (with assistance from guidance counsellors, teachers, and parents) between essential, open, applied, or academic courses. Students in Grades 11 and 12 take courses at either the workplace, (community) college, mixed (college/university), or university level. Academic level courses in Grades 9 and 10 are required to take university courses in Grades 11 and 12. Applied level courses generally lead to college courses and essential level to workplace courses.

While Ontario’s high school tracks are supposed to reflect student interest as opposed to perceived ability, in practice they still function as an academic hierarchy. For example, if the tracks represented different pathways that best met student’s different needs and interests, we would expect academic achievement to be similar across each pathway. Yet, an analysis of over 124,000 students in Grade 10 (Maharaj, 2014) found that academic achievement in applied level math classes was an average of 8% lower compared to academic classes. The corresponding achievement gap between applied and academic tracks for Grade 10 English was 9%. As for the claim that students can easily switch between tracks, the reality is that while many change from a higher to a lower track (e.g. going from academic to applied or college courses), virtually no students (less than 1%) change from a lower to a higher track during their entire high school career (Maharaj et al., 2013).

Theoretical Framework

To analyze how academic tracking affects relationships between students in different tracks, this paper utilizes social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). While previous theoretical work assumed that group conflict required “real conflict of group interests” (Campbell, 1965) such as competition over scarce resources, social identity theory (SIT) posits that the mere belonging to a group is sufficient to trigger in-group favouritism and out-group hostility. Support for this idea was provided by experimental data demonstrating intragroup favouritism and intergroup discrimination even when assignment to groups was arbitrary or explicitly random (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Tajfel, 1982).

According to Tajfel and Turner (1986), social categorizations are often hierarchical and work to,

create and define the individual’s place in society. Social groups, understood in this sense, provide their members with an identification of themselves in social terms. These identifications are to a very large extent relational and comparative: they define the individual as similar to or different from, as “better” or “worse” than, members of other groups. (p. 16)

Belonging to a group that enjoys higher social value than comparison groups confers prestige on an individual, while membership in subordinate groups can result in an internalization of inferiority (Wagner et al., 1986).

SIT predicts that once grouping takes place, people are likely less likely to behave as individuals interacting with other individuals. Instead, they act as “members of their groups standing in certain defined relationships to members of other groups” (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 10). The stronger that individuals identify with the group, the more likely they are to de-individuate and adopt the prototypical characteristics of that group. Such self-stereotyping increases perception of similarities with other in-group members and differences with out-group members. A consequence of the attempt to achieve positive group differentiation is the widespread adoption of negative stereotypes of outgroup members. This is perhaps not surprising as social identity theory predicts that the greater the institutionalized legitimacy attached to group differentiation, the more likely subordinated groups will accept their inferior status (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Such “consensual inferiority” has been found in studies of other low status groups (Caddick, 1982; Gregor & McPherson, 1966; Milner, 1975).

Applied to the context of the present study, social identity theory offers several predictions. First, students will form friendship groups composed primarily of others in the same academic track. Past research lends support to this hypothesis (Kubitschek & Hallinan, 1998). Second, we would expect to see conflictual relationships between groups of students in different tracks. And third, given the institutionalized and hierarchical nature of academic tracking, we might expect students in lower academic tracks to have received and internalized negative stereotypes of themselves as inferior and less deserving.

Methods and Methodology

The interview data for this analysis is drawn from an action research study performed by Zareey (2013). The goal of the original study was to bring the voices of youth to the forefront of the discourse on tracking, while at the same time providing a space for youth and parents to ask questions and gain an understanding of the tracking process in order to help the youth reach their educational goals.

Researchers’ Positionality and Research Site Context

Maharaj identifies as a South Asian male and has had an interest in tracking stretching back over a decade to the beginning of his teaching career at a high school for at-risk students in Toronto. This prompted an interest in the racialized nature of tracking that would lead to the publication of several articles calling for the dissolution of the practice (Maharaj, 2014, 2015, 2018).

Zareey identifies as a male of South Asian/Persian decent and had been residing for three years in the community of the research site, Mornelle Court, in Toronto, Ontario, and was actively involved in the community life of the neighborhood through the facilitation of empowerment programs for youth. The neighborhood of Mornelle Court is in the suburb of Scarborough, in the north-east end of Toronto. It is composed of nine high-rise and low-rise apartment buildings, two of which are ‘Designated Housing Projects’ that provide housing to individuals and families who otherwise could not afford it. Mornelle Court’s population of approximately 3500 people are predominantly from South Asian and Caribbean backgrounds, and mean household income is below that of the national average (City of Toronto, 2014; Toronto Community Housing, 2019, p.13).

The research was conducted by canvassing doors unannounced which was contextually appropriate. The researcher initially engaged in conversations with parents at the door, where the role of the researcher was explained, and permission requested to engage in conversations with their children regarding tracking. This was done over a 3-week period during January 2013.

Data Collection

One-on-one interviews as well as focus group discussions were the primary methods of data collection. However, the concept of an *interview* should not be assumed to be normal or an activity that is universally understood. Many of the research participants and their parents identified as new immigrants to Canada and came from countries where the idea of someone conducting an interview, as a formal way of gathering information, was not commonplace. The concept of the interview has grown largely from Western traditions and has been normalized in sociological research in the West only since the 1930s (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). In this study, interviews were deliberately constructed to create an open conversation, which required attention to detail from the methods of sampling to the structure of the interview; a key factor was also that Zareey had built pre-existing relationships of trust with interviewees through his volunteer work as a youth group facilitator.

Since the sample size was modest, purposeful sampling was used to ensure that youth from each track were represented, and that the study included a balanced sampling of ages, grades, and genders. Zareey also made use of elements of network sampling or snowball sampling (Creswell, 2005; Marshall, 1996). Network sampling is generally understood to be the process where current respondents help recruit new respondents through either active or passive means (Mouw & Verdery, 2012). Being recommended by a friend to participate in the study promoted ease with the research process among newly recruited members and encouraged participation from youth who may otherwise not have been included.

The interviews were semi-structured (Creswell, 2005) and permission was requested to audio-record. The order of research questions was just as important as the content. There were natural opening questions such as “how is school going?” and “what classes are you taking?” that provided a comfortable start to the conversation. The researcher would then ask the participant about their academic track and then how he or she ended up in the track they were in. This would then lead to more open questions such as, “can you tell me about the relationships between students in different streams?” Questions such as these helped to unpack the lived experience of these students and opened doors for further conversation. Whether a focus group or a one-on-one interview was held depended on what felt natural for the youth and their parents and was evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Time was set aside after each evening of interviews to reflect on multiple aspects including the researchers’ positionality and whether any elements of the research process could be improved to allow for the youths’ voices and experiences to be more freely shared and accurately recorded. As Dei writes “by centering the students’ narratives in our analysis and working from these experiences to develop a theoretical understanding, the students themselves have played an integral role in the creation of this knowledge” (Dei et al., 2016, p. 33).

There were four focus group discussions and nine in-depth interviews conducted with a total of 18 research participants - 12 students and six parents. The participating students attended six different schools in the Mornelle neighbourhood in the east-end of Toronto, Ontario, and all four tracks were represented (locally developed, applied, academic, and International Baccalaureate). Seven participants identified as Sri Lankan background, six identified as Black Caribbean, three as Pakistani, and two as Afghani. In terms of races, 12 of the interviewees identified as Brown (South and Central Asian), six as Black, and none as white. All of the participants were either first- or second-generation immigrant youth, meaning they were born outside of Canada or born within Canada to non-Canadian born parents. All interviewees had lived within the Mornelle neighborhood for at least six months. Eleven participants identified as female and seven as male. Grades 7 through 12 were represented. Figure 1 below details the characteristics of the student research participants.

Figure 1*Student Participant Information*

Pseudonym:	1	Sophia	2	Aiden	3	Jayla	4	Madushalia
Grade:		7		9		9		10
Stream/Track:		N/A (Elementary school)		Loc. Dev & Applied		Applied		Academic
Gender:		F		M		F		F
Ethnicity:		Sri Lankan		Sri Lankan		Black		Sri Lankan
Career Goals:		Plans to take Academic courses in high school		Undecided		Undecided		Plans to take photography in college
Pseudonym:	5	Omar	6	Jordan	7	Brenkshan	8	Sinoja
Grade:		10		10		10		10
Stream/Track:		Applied		Applied & Academic		Academic		I.B.
Gender:		M		M		M		F
Ethnicity:		Pakistani		Black Jamaican		Sri Lankan		Sri Lankan
Career Goals:		Undecided		Policeman or Businessman		Computer Programmer		Undecided
Pseudonym:	9	Laylee	10	Grace	11	Hamid	12	Shajinnia
Grade:		10		12		College - Year 1		University - Year 2
Stream/Track:		I.B. & Academic		Applied		N/A		N/A
Gender:		F		F		M		F
Ethnicity:		Afghani		Black Jamaican		Afghani		Sri Lankan
Career Goals:		Undecided		Secondary school teacher		Undecided		Environmental Planner

Data Analysis

To code, analyze, and identify emergent themes, each recorded interview was listened to multiple times, and transcribed. In the transcription, note was made of when the youth or parent paused, of the nature of their tone and that of the interviewer, as well as other factors such as body language. Details of the physical scene of the interview were recorded immediately after conducting it, including elements such as the time of day, where each participant was seated, whether the TV was on, and how long the interview lasted. Utilizing open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), interview content was sorted into emergent themes centered around career development, negative connotations associated with track placement, conflicts between students in different tracks, and the racialized nature of tracking. These themes were then grouped into categories of track, race, gender, school, and grade. Coding was done on a using standard word processor and spreadsheet software. Salient quotations were extracted from the transcripts that addressed each theme. Where appropriate, graphs were drawn to aid in evaluation, and percentages were used to give a clearer picture of whether the response of a student differed or reflected the consensus of the group when pertaining to a certain theme.

Findings

While students in Ontario are supposed to be able to freely choose their own academic pathway, many students reported being pressured by school staff (i.e., teachers and guidance counsellors) into choosing particular tracks, even when such tracks did not align with their own personal goals. In fact, among the 12 students that participated in the study, 11 were in tracks that did not align with their desired career. As the mother of one Grade 10 student remarked, “Guidance

counselors try to push kids into things that they don't want to do.” An example of this comes from Grace, a Grade 12 student, who recounts the frustration of realizing that the track she was counselled into made her career goal unattainable:

Even if you want to do academic, they'll tell you to do applied. They said applied would be easier so it'd be smarter if I took applied. But now I realize that this kind of screwed me over because I have to take university courses if I want to be a teacher. I can't change my courses because it's too late.

Jordan, a Grade 10 student, similarly worried about how being in applied level classes would constrain his future career options:

Since I'm in applied, my teacher says some of the stuff academic students learn we don't learn. So I think it's unfair because you can't be taking out stuff from the unit. Some students are getting the most education they can and others are getting the least. Let's say they try to get a job and they didn't get taught the information so they won't be as good.

Recommendations from guidance counsellors were usually based on students' previous academic achievement, thus solidifying the idea of Ontario's pathway system as an academic hierarchy. When asked why he chose academic level classes, Brenkshan, a Grade 10 student, replied, “Actually, my teacher chose it. My marks were OK in Grade 8 and my teacher recommended my stream for that reason.” Furthermore, students and parents reported that teachers routinely encouraged students they felt were difficult to teach to switch into lower tracks. For example, Jordan reported that when his classmate struggled with a concept in math, the teacher said in front of the entire class that there was a lower level she could easily be switched into.

These dynamics are examples of the institutional legitimacy (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) provided by schools that create a hierarchy among groups of students in different tracks. As a result, students perceived tracking as a sorting process where intelligent and hardworking students were placed in higher tracks whereas “dumb” and “lazy” students were placed in lower tracks. It is important to note that these conceptions can begin prior to high school. When asked about the differences among the academic tracks, Sophia, a middle school student, remarked “Applied is for students that need more help, academic is for average, and IB is for really smart.” Sinoja, a Grade 10 student in academic classes, put it this way: “The people in applied just don't try...they're just lazy. They don't know how to work properly. They don't do their homework...They don't have the skills in order to work hard.” Consistent with the predictions of social identity theory, Omar, a Grade 10 student in applied classes, concurred with Sinoja while appearing to internalize the negative stereotypes of those in the applied track: “Some students don't care about education and they get put in applied. They don't take education as they should. There are [other] people who like working hard and want to be strong at a subject.”

Fear of the negative connotations associated with low track placement was a motivating factor for some students in determining their own choice of tracks. When asked why she choose academic versus applied level classes, Madushalia replied “I don't want to feel dumb. I don't want people to see me...I don't know...as stupid.” She then shared that the academic performance of students placed in lower tracks often became a self-fulfilling prophecy: “Some people in locally developed, over time their mindsets change and they become what they believe... if you think you're going to fail, you do, because no one has high expectations of you.”

As predicted by SIT, most students reported that people in their schools formed friendship groups predominantly with same-track peers. Grace, who is in applied level classes, discussed how the tracking process negatively impacted one of her friendships:

I had a friend who was in applied but she ended up going to academic...so I don't get to talk to her anymore. We don't see each other. You base your friends based on what classes you're in. So I don't really talk to them, to anyone outside of my stream.

Beyond the physical separation brought about by tracking, the perceptions of what belonging to a particular track said about the people in those tracks worked to colour social relationships among students. Students in higher tracks enjoyed status and prestige that they wished to maintain. For example, students in higher tracks said they preferred to be friends with people who were as intelligent and hardworking as themselves. As Madhushalia put it,

The IBs are with the IBs, the academics are with the academics, and the applied are with the applied. So, the IBs only do studying, like in the cafeteria, that's all they do. The academics are a mix. But the applied, they don't do anything. The IBs are usually never friends with the applied...None of my friends did applied, at least my close friends. Usually, you're with people who are like you, so I was always friends with the smart people.

Consistent with the attempts to achieve positive group differentiation discussed by SIT, Madushalia's remarks provide an example of how students in higher tracks tended to adopt negative stereotypes of those in lower tracks. Brenkshen, a Grade 10 student in academic level classes explained his friendship choices this way, "If I'm friends with people in academic it's because they're also in academic. Applied is for people who are weak in a subject. People would want to be friends with someone who's strong in a subject because they're smart." Higher track students worried that the negative traits of those in lower tracks would rub off on them if they got too close. For example, in response to a question about why certain students are in applied level classes, Sinoja talked about the dangers of associating with others that have poor work habits:

The reason is the people around them, their influences. When you're with someone a lot then you start picking up on what they do. I guess if you're smart but you're hanging out with people who never do their work, they go places, so you go places and get away from where you want to go, where you're supposed to go, where you could go.

These beliefs, along with the accordant social segregation they produced, were a source of conflict between tracks. Bullying between tracks was common, with those in lower tracks often the target. Jordan, a Grade 10 student in applied level classes explained the dynamic this way,

The applied kids are treated differently. I know people who are in academic, they treat the applied kids bad. My friend, Tom, they say he's dumb, that he's not going to get a job. Then there's the locally developed - they really like to beat on those kids. They see them in the hallway and ask, 'what class do you have?' If the guy says he has locally developed history, they call him stupid and dumb.

The negative treatment of students in lower tracks was at times reinforced by the actions of teachers. Shajinnia, who recently completed high school and was in academic classes throughout, discussed an experience where her Grade 12 teacher asked the class to mark the chemistry tests of applied level students who were also in Grade 12:

The academics did look down on the applied kids. Remember I told you that story from chemistry where our teacher told us to mark something of the applied? It was so easy. It was obvious they didn't try. This was not Grade 12 stuff; it was like Grade 9. We all just sat there and laughed.

Experiences like these worked to solidify the feeling of superiority among students in higher tracks while signaling that ridicule of students in lower tracks was acceptable. As a result, students reported in-group pressures to avoid socializing with peers in lower tracks, with negative consequences applied to those who strayed from this social norm. For those in higher tracks, the possibility of the stigma associated with lower tracks being applied to themselves if they were to form cross-track friendships was too great a risk to take.

Even among those in the highest tracks, relative prestige differentials worked to produce stereotypes and conflict. Madushalia, a student in academic classes felt that tracking mainly worked to make students “feel like less than other people...it’s not about what you actually learn and stuff...I hate feeling like those girls in IB are so great, I mean they think they’re so great, and they want everyone to know it.” Discussing her relationship with students in IB, Madushalia continued, IBs talk about academics, academics talk about IBs. There’s a group of people in our school, they’re all Brown, they’re all IB. They’re blunt and they have bad attitudes. They don’t act their age. They act like they’re older, they act like they’re tougher, they think they’re tough. They’re confident. I avoid them all the time. I don’t like them, I despise them.

In addition to the friction between students in the highest tracks, the above quote also reveals the racialized nature of tracking. Many participants in the study reported that students in the IB program tended to be predominantly from South and Central Asian backgrounds, while students in applied level-classes were disproportionately Black. Laylee, an Afghani student, noted that there were no Black students in the IB program at her school. This led to the perception within the school of Black students being “not as smart.” Sinoja, a Sri Lankan Grade 10 student, shared this anecdote on the racial nature of tracking: “People talk bad between streams. Once someone was talking about how the majority of the class in applied math are Black. She was just making fun. It’s bad, but it’s kind of true though.” Sinoja went on to say that the joke “IB stands for I’m Brown” was commonly circulated within schools. Given its racialized nature, the cross-track bullying fostered by tracking worked to increase racial divisions within schools. It also led to school buildings themselves becoming split along racial lines. The nature of school as a racially divided space was explained this way by Grace, a Black student in Grade 12:

Our school’s already really racist. It’s pretty bad. We have a Black hallway. We have a Brown hallway. We have a white hallway. And you just can’t chill in any place you want. So separating them by stream, there’s good to it, but there’s a negative side.

In summary, contrary to official policy, Ontario’s pathway system operates as an academic hierarchy, where students are placed in different tracks based on their perceived ability and personal characteristics, irrespective of their own ambitions. Students develop and internalize stereotypes of what it meant to belong to different tracks, with the result that between tracks, bullying is common and friendships are rare. While those in lower tracks are most often the target of bullying, conflict between those in the highest tracks is also present. Given its racialized nature, tracking also works to increase racial divisions within schools, with the result that schools become both socially and physically divided along racial lines.

Discussion

This study illuminates how tracking impacts social relationships within schools. The experiences shared by participants largely comports with the predictions made by social identity

theory. Students formed relationships predominantly with same-track peers and relations between students in different tracks were often hostile. According to SIT, the mere sorting of students into different groups is enough to engender within group favouritism and between group antagonism. However, the institutional legitimacy and prestige differentials associated with tracking clearly exacerbates these effects. In their original work on SIT, Tajfel and Turner (1986) stated that social categorizations work to define individuals as “better” or “worse” than members of other groups. This aligns with the experiences of participants in this study, with one student explicitly stating that tracking was less about providing different learning experiences as it was about making students “feel like less than other people.” SIT also predicts that students in lower tracks are likely to internalize negative stereotypes of themselves, as was the case with one participant in the study. However, whether this reflected negative self-perception among other low-track students was unclear.

This study has important implications for practitioners and policymakers. The *Ontario Schools: Kindergarten to Grade 12* (Government of Ontario, 2016) policy document states that the choice of secondary school courses is purportedly at the discretion of students and their parents, “Course selection for students under the age of eighteen must be made with parental approval...” (p. 70), and that “When selecting their courses in Grades 9 and 10, students are not expected to make binding decisions about a particular educational or career pathway...” (p. 72). However, the participants in this study reported being pressured by teachers and guidance counsellors into choosing particular tracks and shared openly that the path they chose in Grades 9 and 10 sent them in a direction that limited their future academic and occupational opportunities.

Though tempting to suggest that a solution to the negative effects of tracking is for individual educators and guidance counsellors to be more cognizant of the impact that they have, those in the field are bound and informed by the culture created by policy (Datnow & Park, 2009). The view that the system of tracking would work if only teachers and guidance counsellors paid consideration to the needs of the student is rhetoric that works to repeat a pattern of blaming the failures of the education system on teachers, rather than critically investigating systemic change (see Cochran-Smith et al., 2018; Kumashiro, 2012; Peterson et al., 2011). Interventions targeted at stakeholders, whether that be the youth, parents, guidance counsellors, or teachers, are limited in as much as they fail to acknowledge the biases and histories embedded within policy. Working to delink systemic racism and colonialism from those policies is a herculean task that requires transparency and support in a spirit that works towards empowerment and reconciliation. If tracking is to continue at all, it is imperative to make public and transparent not only the school selection and admissions procedures, but also their grouping strategies. As Lynch & Baker (2005) suggest, the inside life of schools needs to be opened for democratic scrutiny and public challenge.

This is not to say that individual educators have no role to play. Teachers and guidance counsellors should be central in the conversations that shape policy that affects them. Educators who have connections with the school community and have successfully helped students achieve educational goals could be placed in formal positions to help influence the actions and attitudes of others.

The findings from this study contain further implications for policymakers. In Ontario, the two main goals of the education system - as outlined in the province’s *Education Act* - are to promote student achievement and well-being. While we have decades of evidence attesting to the negative effects of tracking on the achievement of those in lower tracks, this study demonstrates the ways in which the practice harms the well-being of almost all students, even those assigned to higher tracks. Taken together, these findings argue in favour of the Radwanski (1987) report’s recommendation to de-track high schools entirely. Ontario has taken a step in this direction by pledging to end tracking

in the first year of high school. This could be expanded incrementally until all students are taught a common, rigorous curriculum.

However, in proceeding down this path, it would be prudent for policymakers to learn from history. Recall that when Ontario high schools last had a common curriculum for all students, only a small minority experienced anything resembling success. Indeed, the move towards establishing different academic tracks in the province was intended to promote greater equity. Therefore, policymakers should consider that simply returning to a common curriculum that engages only a privileged subset of students will do little to attenuate the social stratification associated with tracking.

Political implications also need to be considered as reducing tracking is likely to incite strong opposition from some parents, particularly those of high-achieving students. This is what happened when Ontario attempted to phase out tracking from high schools in the early 1990s. More recent evidence of this phenomenon comes from 2017, when the Toronto District School Board floated the idea of phasing out its specialty high schools to ensure greater equity across the system. The backlash from parents in specialty schools was so fierce that the board quickly backpedaled and abandoned the idea entirely (Gordon, 2017).

Though this study is unique in investigating the social impacts of tracking, it would be inaccurate to draw statistical generalizations from this qualitative study. This study was limited in that it drew results from a single low-income neighbourhood in Toronto with a population that is mostly of South Asian and Caribbean descent. None of the students and parents that participated in the study identified as Indigenous, East Asian, or white, despite Toronto containing significant numbers of each of these populations (Fleischer et al., 2019). Thus, how tracking affects relationships between students in other neighbourhoods (e.g., high-income, mostly white) may be different from the findings reported in this study. Future research in this area could explore how tracking impacts the social lives of students in other contexts.

Despite this limitation, we believe this study aids in understanding the equity implications of widely adopted educational policies. A notable contribution to the literature is that it centers students' experiences of tracking systems. While other research has noted the social stratification that accompanies tracking (e.g., Reichelt et al., 2019), this study provides insight into what this looks and feels like at the school level. That students in lower tracks, who are mostly Black, faced the most negative social consequences lends further evidence to the body of literature that has documented the harms and inequities caused by tracking. Showing how tracking can lead to increased racial divisions within schools is also alarming and noteworthy. As education systems strive for social justice, practices like tracking that widen racial inequities and increase racial polarization are deserving of critical scrutiny from researchers, policymakers, and practitioners alike.

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