Zhané Bennett

How can immigration help us to understand racialized and gendered tracking?

For some time, sociologists have been researching the question: How much does school matter for student success? In an attempt to uncover the school's impact beyond student characteristics, or *school effects*, sociologists discovered the phenomenon of *tracking*, or the separation of students according to perceived ability. Given the revolutionary discovery that all schools were not equal, and that a school's socioeconomic setting did impact student outcomes, researchers aimed to compare disparities across schools to those within. While research pertaining to school effects across different institutions, or *between-school effects*, compared schools with a relatively uniform population in order to control for student background, research pertaining to school effects within the same institution, or *within-school effects*, aimed to understand whether students in the same institution had different experiences. Tracking research considers that *within-school effects* are more impactful than *between-school effects* and reveals facets of inequality that are deeply-rooted in our education system.

In efforts aimed at integration, sociologists debunked James Coleman's segregationist idea that the impact of family background was greater than the impact of the school, which affirmed the idea that black students in segregated schools were falling behind students in white schools because of intrinsic differences rather than external factors. Considering that race is a social construct, and that racism and racist systems are inherently unconstitutional and morally wrong, *Brown v. Board of Education* debunked the notion of separate but equal. In turn, white flight created colorless suburban private schools with public money, interrupting integration[1] and replacing it with colorblind meritocratic tracking programs[2]. Although the not-at-all systemically covert Jim Crow, and other forms of legal segregation based on class and immigration, have been legally cast out and have seemingly disappeared, they have instead been replaced by the more systemically covert, merit tracking. Resisting integration under a culturally prized meritocratic framework, educators discovered how to legally educate white students together separately, by setting up different classrooms within the same building. Apart from its deficits[3], tracking is able to thrive because of the problematic foundations of our society.

The nature of our nation's education system is rooted in a cultural affirmation of a meritocratic framework, which is deeply embedded in our socioeconomic organization. Despite the variety of research claiming that we have socially constructed the way in which we interpret intelligence and cognitive ability, we treat these qualities as objective and intrinsic. Pierre

---

[1] Integration efforts included federal mandates in the 1970's to bus students to white schools that were not in the same neighborhood, threatening housing discrimination, neighborhood segregation, and concentrated poverty which were key success stories of Jim Crow.

[2] Gifted and Talented Program

[3] In *Integration Interrupted*, Karolyn Tyson finds that low track students do worse when they are concentrated in low test score environments, high track students may be challenged too much while low track students are not challenged enough, tracking negatively correlates with interracial friendliness, and academic success is linked to whiteness.

Bourdieu's idea of *cultural capital*[4] affirms that different cultures existing within the same space are ranked, and underlines the challenges facing social, ethnic, racial and economic integration in our education system and our nation. Annette Lareau's[5] finding that social class impacts family life insofar as child-rearing practices have a role in skill cultivation, unveils how these class differences transcend academic boundaries and make their way into school. culture, and concurrently, the job market. While Lareau does not rank *concerted cultivation* and *natural growth*, external players that have conformed to the society in which they are embedded by internalizing dominant cultural values, they have constructed and upheld a reward system designed to award a middle-class culture. What Lareau does not emphasize, that sociologist Shamus Khan[6] does, is the importance of race and class in education. Blackness, especially as a result of its historical relationship with capitalism and imperialism, will always be a distinguishing factor in the education production function– and black students' corporeal distinction prevents them from thoroughly adapting the *Habitus*[7] required for equity in education– and an attempt at rejecting this through scholastic achievement may lead others to perceive the student as *acting white*.

Race, which served as a vital component of an outdated form of segregation, Jim Crow, continues to serve as a barrier to educational attainment in its modern form, racialized tracking. Children entering the education system become unequal in the way that school administrators and other external players interpret and reward them, which directly impacts their disposition to experiencing ease in every dimension of society. When students' class background, which is prone to intersect[8] with race, together contributing to a sense of culture, interacts with the culture of a school, the students' experience can either prepare or fail to prepare them for mainstream success in the world they are inheriting.

Gender and Immigrant Identities

Sociologists' contributions to our understanding of education is sociologically relevant to wider national handling of the school-to-prison pipeline[9] and mass incarceration. While Ann Ferguson offers a compelling argument of how the system of punishment in schools track African American boys into the justice system, and Carla Shedd introduces the universal carceral

---

[4] Cultural Capital: Non-financial social assets that promote social mobility beyond economic means. The relative power or status associated with a particular cultural idea or style and of the people who choose to associate themselves with it.

[5] In *Unequal Childhoods*, Lareau observes the home of 12 African American and white families, then categorizes their distinct child-rearing practices into *concerted cultivation* and *natural growth*

[6] Shamus Khan researched how students at St. Paul's, one of the most prestigious high schools, are learning how to embody privilege in more diverse environments. Elite institutions are becoming more diverse, but openness does not mean equality. Khan seeks to understand inequality within a meritocracy.

[7] Habitus is the presence of social and organizational structures in individuals' bodies in the form of durable dispositions, which guide individuals' thoughts and behaviors. It is embodied history that has been internalized and forgotten and often the source of one's practical sense. There is a sense of "fitting in" when the body is well suited to a social context.

[8] Intersectionality– Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory regarding the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

[9] School to prison pipeline: punitive school policies lead to low achievement, system involvement, and other negative outcomes.

apparatus, neither of them give much insight into how African American girls experience racialized tracking. Kimberlé Crenshaw[10] investigated the specific contours of race and gender in schools in relationship to zero-tolerance policies, social marginalization, and criminalization, and found that race may be a more significant factor for girls, since the relative risk of suspension is higher for black girls when compared to white girls than it is for black boys when compared to white boys, although black boys are the most disciplined group[11].

As it is important to understand gender, it is also important to consider how ethnic differences between students of the same racial category may impact their experience in schools. Black West Indian immigrants, especially Jamaicans, are a major part of the New York City population. Female migrants have outnumbered males throughout the post-1965 period, a gender difference that is linked to the unemployment patterns in Jamaica, which have been consistently higher for women. The sex ratio in New York City is 75 males for every 100 females. In *One in Three*, Foner discovers that according to the 2010 U.S. Census, Jamaican women had the highest labor force participation rate among New York City's top ten foreign born groups, which was 82.9% compared to their male counterparts which was 78.8% (Foner 48). That is to say, West Indian immigrant women are working at higher rates than their male counterparts.

On a larger scale, the gender and immigrant components, which are intersectional, are both sociologically important in understanding educational investment, attainment and social mobility. Despite the experience of intersectionality and double marginalization, black women are leading blacks' rates of college completion, but not those of whites[12]. Is racialized tracking, the school-to-prison pipeline, and mass incarceration of black men the reason why black women are leading black men in higher-education attainment and working more? Are black immigrant women working more because their male counterparts are undergoing the same fates of racial discrimination as African American men? How does immigration shed light onto the phenomenon of racialized and gendered tracking? Although the point of my analysis is not to answer these challenging questions, it serves to highlight the complexity of understanding other

---

[10] In *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected*, Kimberlé Crenshaw found that the relative magnitude of the racial disparity between girls is greater than the disparity between boys; discomfort as a result of metal detectors dissuades school attendance; Black girls are seen as more socially mature and self-reliant, leading to a "benign neglect" that diminishes school attachment; punitive rather than restorative responses to conflict push girls out of school and into the juvenile justice system; zero-tolerance policies may exacerbate the vulnerability of girls to sexual harassment and bullying because it penalizes them for defending themselves against such acts, contributing to their insecurity at school; girls who struggle with trauma come to the attention of school personnel only when their behavior leads to punishable offenses; black girls tend have a high incidence of interpersonal violence; black girls tend to be faced with caretaking responsibilities that compromised their ability to pursue their academic goals; Pregnant girls who burdened by early parenthood in ways that boys are not, are segregated from their peers and stigmatized in a manner that may undermine their attachment to school.

[11] In an Intra-gender comparison of expulsion rates in the New York public school districts during the 2011-2012 school year, black girls were expelled 53 times more than white girls, while black boys were suspended 10 times more than white boys. Ninety percent of expelled girls were black, and none were white. The disparity had to be calculated by imagining that one white girl was suspended.

[12] In *The Rise of Women: The Growing Gender Gap in Education and What it Means for American Schools*, DiPrete and Buchmann found that "blacks' rates of college completion have risen steadily over time, but more rapidly for women than for men" and "black women have held a consistent advantage, albeit a small one early on, in college completion over black men for more than seventy years ; among whites, women's advantage in college completion emerged in recent decades"(40).

identities apart from the African American male, which are present in the education system, and touch on how these other identities interact with tracking.

In order to understand tracking, resisting the conflation of gender disparities in the experiences of black students is as important as resisting the conflation of black identities. What does immigration add to the discussion about racialized tracking in schools? Immigration is on the rise[13]. New York City is the center of the black immigrant community and accounts for one quarter to one third of all West Indians in the nation (Foner 7). Among West Indian immigrants[14], Jamaicans and Guyanese are the most prominent– in 2010 there were 179,000 Jamaicans and 139,000 Guyanese in New York, many of which are 1.5 and second generation immigrants that are enrolled in schools (Foner 39). In *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities*, Mary Waters analyzes the conflation of African American with black immigrant Caribbean groups, which undermines their cultural differences, furthers the notion that their identities are interchangeable, and makes immigrants more susceptible to racial discrimination pertaining to school, employment and housing, ultimately increasing their chances of downward mobility.

The problems with identity conflation lie in the differences between West Indian and American history. Caribbean immigrants are from multiethnic and multiracial societies where blacks are the majority and are dispersed throughout the class system, and thus have low anticipation of sour race relations, which allows them to have better interpersonal interactions with white Americans than many native African Americans. When their ambitions and expectations are diluted as they face discrimination, they still tend to challenge blocked mobility in a militant fashion when they encounter it (Waters 7). However, their lack of internalized marginalization and open-mindedness is often no match for the larger neighborhood and school effects that they assimilate into, alongside African Americans.

The education system in the West Indies is based on the British pyramidal structure; those who can handle the rigor of high school move onto high school, and those who cannot do not continue. After Jamaica's independence in 1962, individual achievement through personal effort, specifically educational achievement, increased in importance. The key point is that middle class children from cities who had a rigorous elementary school education come to the U.S. end up doing really well and end up in advanced classes. Whereas poorer immigrants from rural towns, who would not have continued to high school because they can barely read and write, are disadvantaged in American schools. The advantage for them is that they are offered the education that they would not have in the West Indies, however the disadvantage is that they are funnelled into neighborhoods and schools that are poor and violent. Waters states, “The best and the worst students in New York high schools are West Indian. The influx of underprepared students also contributed to the downward spiral of the high school because they lowered the

[13] 13% percent of the United States population was foreign born, and there are approximately 3 million immigrants in New York City, according to the 2010 U.S. Census.
[14] ...most of whom are from Jamaica, Trinidad, Guyana, Barbados, and Grenada.

standardized test scores that savvy middle-class parents use to assess the schools they consider sending their children to" (278). The New York City school system, unlike the West Indian school system which only selects prepared students to enter high schools, depends on test scores for funding and resources. Research has shown that when black people move into neighborhoods, white people move out, and when underprepared black immigrant students move into schools, middle class parents send their students to different schools, taking money and resources with them. This is an example of how West Indian immigrants face barriers and racial discrimination that they would not have expected back home, and thus how this limits their pursuit of the American dream. In turn, middle class immigrant students who remain in those schools are left unchallenged. Is it better for middle-class immigrants to move to more affluent school districts? When they do, are they subject to racialized tracking and its effects in the way that African Americans are?

It is important to consider Waters' findings regarding the development of immigrant identities and class differences. She finds that in many cases middle-class immigrants are able to pass down their cultural perspectives to their second-generation children who are "ethnic-identified" while working-class immigrants are not. These perspectives include the importance of education, the idea that discrimination is not very prominent, and the acceptance of negative portrayals of black Americans. Waters found that middle-class second-generation interviewees who were "ethnic-identified" agreed with their parents in that there is a strong difference between themselves and black Americans, strongly emphasizing that being black and being black American were not the same, and avoided any chance of being identified with them. [15] However, working-class second-generation interviewees identified more with being "American", embraced black American culture, recognized discrimination, and often frowned upon their parents' inability to understand the American social system (296).

As I interpret Waters' research, it seems that "ethnic-identified" middle-class immigrant students are able to maintain the notion that education is the most important thing, while working class immigrant students were more likely to become pessimistic about America's education system. "American-identified" middle-class immigrants are more likely to be pessimistic about their future than those who are "ethnic-Identified". My interpretation of *Black Identities* is that model minority success stories stem from "ethnic-identified" middle-class students who are rewarded in the job market for being "ethnic"[16], while "American-identified" middle-class students who have lost ethnic distinctiveness are prone to being viewed as black Americans, and thus susceptible to downward mobility.

This analysis thrives within the context of understanding the immigrant experience of tracking in schools. The students who remain in neighborhoods and schools of a low socioeconomic status, whether they are middle class or not, are downwardly mobile. The

---

[15] "They describe the culture and values of lower-class black Americans as including a lack of discipline, lack of work ethic, laziness, bad child-rearing practices, and lack or respect for education" (Waters 290).

[16] "When West Indians lose their distinctiveness as immigrants or ethnics they become not just Americans but black Americans" (Waters 5).

students who are “American-identified” are downwardly mobile. While Waters’ main point is that immigrants who lose their distinctiveness are downwardly mobile, I tie her discussion into racialized tracking and argue that although middle-class ethnic-identified students are more resistant to downward mobility, middle-class students in more affluent schools are also subject to downward mobility regardless of how they identify because of the effects of racialized tracking. Earlier I presented the questions: Is it better for middle-class immigrants to move to more affluent school districts? And when they do, are they subject to racialized tracking and its effects in the same way that African Americans are?

Although these are complex multifaceted questions, I argue that racialized tracking contributes to the downward mobility that middle-class immigrants face when they leave declining schools and enter more affluent schools. Waters discusses how the children of immigrants develop “oppositional identities” in order to deal with “race as a master status” that overwhelms their families. These oppositional identities involve the idea that doing well in school is “acting white”, which in turn erodes their chances at success. Waters’ analysis of these oppositional identities that dispose West Indian students to conflating academic success and whiteness is important to the discussion of tracking because it is parallel to Karolyn Tyson’s idea that in diverse schools and in majority white schools, high-achieving black students are more likely to be perceived as “acting white”. Accusing someone of acting white not only calls their racial authenticity into question, and discourages black students from striving academically, but also reinforces the notion of academic achievement as a cultural object. This notion is fundamental to the foundation of racialized tracking.

More particularly, Waters’ inclusion of the oppositional identity concept in her description of second-generation immigrants relates to Tyson’s statement, “many people view students’ current use of the acting white slur in an academic context as simply part of the “oppositional nature” of black youth culture” (36). Tyson found that high-achieving black students in racially diverse and predominantly white schools reported problems with black students perceiving their achievements as “acting white” and other racialized ridicule and ostracism because they were underrepresented in their advanced classes, while at predominantly black high schools academic success did not, since they were in an environment where the highest achieving students in the school were black (67). Tyson discusses how this oppositional identity represents a cultural frame of reference that black Americans have developed to maintain boundaries between blacks and whites, and furthermore how academic achievement has become a part of this boundary making.

Waters’ research demonstrates that immigrants with a strong ethnic identity are more likely to succeed because employers perceive them as hard working and of “good culture”. A few main visible indicators of ethnic identity of West Indian immigrants in the U.S. are accents and style of dress. The majority of working-class second-generation immigrants that do not have the means to maintain transnational ties to the West Indies lose their accents, adapt a more American wardrobe, are less visually distinguishable from their African American counterparts,

and thus are more susceptible to the racialized tracking consequences of "acting white" and other problems such as implicit bias in school.

An analysis of West Indian immigration is important to understanding the pitfalls of tracking which, when racialized, makes it possible for academic achievement to become a part of boundary making. The case of West Indian immigrants' disposition to downward mobility by the way of school and the experience of segmented assimilation[17] prove that "good culture", model minority status, and even a strong primary education overseas are no match for racial discrimination in the U.S. education system and beyond.

What to make of the West Indian Model Minority Myth in our seemingly meritocratic education system?

The West Indian model minority myth stems from the idea that African Americans should be able to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. If a black immigrant, who came to America in search of a better life, can achieve social mobility then why can't African Americans? The effects race[18] and ethnicity[19] conflation, which can be seen through the West Indian immigrant experience in New York City schools, brings to light the problems of educational equity and ultimately socioeconomic mobility. Immigrants' place in the American school tracking system is important to our narrative because it shows that the problem lies not in culture or individual choice, but rather in higher systemic factors that permeate the neighborhood schools of black Americans and their experiences at affluent schools.

West Indian and African American neighborhoods are often intertwined, and they both experience high rates of residential segregation from whites. The white gaze groups black people together regardless of language, origin, skin complexion and class. Many second-generation black immigrants are seen as African American until they specify otherwise. Even after specifying, they are often categorized as such, especially when born and raised in America, and hence socialized into the African American community. One example of this, is that during standardized tests and surveys, students of West Indian origin are usually only limited to the category "African American/Black". Upon their arrival, West Indians are welcomed with a black/white binary, which was strengthened by the infamous one drop rule, a prominent legal principle that institutionalized the white gaze.

---

[17] Segmented Assimilation Theory- there are several distinct trajectories that the children of the new immigrants, or second generation immigrants can follow– these paths include downward as well as upward mobility.

[18] Race– there socially significant differences between human groups are innate and unchangeable.

[19] Ethnicity– there are groups whose members feel a sense of belonging because of a belief in common ancestry and descent .

Throughout history, mainstream society has compared immigrant groups to African Americans, especially in the context of The Great Migration[20], where African Americans arrived among other immigrant groups in search for better opportunities in the industrialized north. European immigrants, such as Italians, Jews, and Irish immigrants were able to achieve social mobility and "become white" in the U.S. census although they had been previously categorized as "ethnics". African-Americans were not able to pick themselves up from their bootstraps and create an entrepreneurial class as quickly as other European immigrants, and when West Indians were able to achieve social mobility, they were seen as the model minority among blacks, which created a myth that erased generations of systemic and interpersonal race-based discrimination[21].

The model minority myth implies that West Indians are better because they invest in themselves through the valuing of education and social mobility, without acknowledge the brutal nature of generations of white supremacy that has conditioned slaves and the children of slaves to invest in white America before themselves. Although African Americans attempted to build an entrepreneurial class they were faced with issues related to Jim Crow, racist housing policies, unequal schooling, redlining, political violence which perpetuated immense generational poverty. Activists have even developed a case for reparations, claiming that is the only way toward socioeconomic equality since the historical trauma is so deeply rooted. Jamaican immigrants, Jews, Italians, and every other immigrant group do not have the same relationship with the United States because they have a different sense of identity, culture, customs, language, and sense of connection to their former homeland, which has given them a relative advantage among marginalized groups in our society.

Although the New York City school system has allowed students to choose where they want to go to school, this choice is more complex than it seems; it comes after a quasi-infinite amount of other choices which have created that student. This idea of "choice" implies individual agency, and thus individual responsibility, but also allows for meritocracy-based tracking, model minority myths, and education inequality to thrive - things which compromise said agency. Although the U.S Department of Education and the New York City School system see education as an equal opportunity for all, it is clear that there is still much work to be done before that becomes a reality for its minority students, namely, black Americans.

---

[20] The Great Migration was the movement of 6 million African-Americans out of the rural Southern United States to the urban Northeast, Midwest, and West that occurred between 1910 and 1970. Until 1910, more than 90 percent of the African-American population lived in the American South.

[21] Africans were stripped of their identity, cultures, customs and values through generations of slavery and degradation, and were forced to detach themselves from their native language, economic practices and sense of identity. Post-slavery was a time of extreme confusion and poverty, especially since generations had passed since they had any connection to the continent of Africa. Africans Americans in the south were conditioned to retain the self-image of the slave, even after migrating to the north.

Works Cited

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. “Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected”. African American Policy Forum. 2015. Web.

DiPrete and Buchmann. *The Rise of Women: The Growing Gender Gap in Education and What it Means for American Schools*. Russell Sage Foundation. 2013. Print.

Foner, Nancy. *One Out of Three: Immigrant New York in the Twenty-First Century*. Columbia University Press. 2013. Print.

Khan, Shamus. *Privilege*. Princeton University Press. 2011. Print.

Lareau, Annette. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. Berkeley: U of California, 2003. Print.

Tyson, Karolyn. I*ntegration Interrupted: Tracking, Black Students, and Acting White After Brown*. 2011. Print.

Waters, Mary. *Black Identities*. Harvard University Press. 1999. Print.

http://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/app/uploads/2015/09/BlackGirlsMatter_Report.pdf