

#DISRUPTTEXTS

Tricia Ebarvia, Lorena Germán, Kim Parker, and Julia Torres, *Column Editors*

This month's columnists critique the systems of White supremacy and tracking in schools, particularly as they relate to accessing AP and honors classes.

Academic Tracking, Canonical Literature, and Disrupting for New Possibilities

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Drawing on critical race theory, we use this column as a way to outline how policies relating to academic tracking and canonical texts uphold White supremacy in schools, specifically in English language arts classrooms. Academic tracking, in which certain students are placed in honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs while others are denied the material benefits, is central to maintaining segregation within schools (Kohli). Academic tracking and canonical curriculum work in tandem to uphold Whiteness and maintain racial hierarchies. We can challenge this

reality. In fact, David Nurenberg called English the “ideal discipline” (63) to be de-tracked within high schools. We contextualize de-tracking and challenging canonical curriculum as important tenets in fighting for justice in schools.

TRACKING SYSTEMS AND CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate formulated three central propositions of applying critical race theory to education studies: (1) Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States; (2) US society is based on property rights; and (3) the intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool through which we can understand social (and, consequently, school) inequity (48). Sabina E. Vaught argues that critical race theory is a valuable framework for education research because it focuses on systematic ways racial hierarchies are perpetuated and eschews misinformed arguments that racism is about individual actions.

Applying a critical race theory lens to tracking systems reveals the “whiteness as property” ideology inherent in course enrollment. Whiteness as property is a “power system that works not in its literal absolutism, but in its ability to extend power over a complex terrain of institutional relationships” (Vaught 38). Analyzing the intersection of race and property is useful to understand school inequities because US society is based on property rights (Ladson-Billings and Tate 48). This power system yields material goods in the form of honors, AP, and IB courses. One key aspect of “whiteness as property” is the “absolute right to exclude,” which is White people’s privilege to avoid any Black influence. This concept originally played out in the “one drop of black blood” law, but it has since manifested in school systems (Ladson-Billings and Tate 60). Vaught notes that tracking is an “effort to maintain the property of Whiteness and give legitimization to supremacist institutions” (116).

Several scholars such as Jeannie Oakes and Carol Corbett Buriss et al. have noted that

students' ability to enroll in honors or advanced courses has more to do with their social relationships than any other factor. In other words, students whose parents have been successful in a formal educational setting are more likely to be placed in honors courses than other students. It is not surprising, given the racist nature of schooling in America, that those students are overwhelmingly White. The placement of White students in honors courses due to social relationships is a continuation of the "dominance of Whiteness across all facets of the socio-economic order" (Vaught 42).

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CANONICAL TEXTS AND WHITE SUPREMACY

Challenging tracking is only part of the solution. A de-tracked English course in which all students receive AP or IB placement but are still subject to White supremacy through curricular choices will reproduce inequities. Naming the harmful forces of the literary canon must be seen as part of a larger strategy. As we outlined in an earlier article, the literary canon "perpetuates White supremacy by positioning White authors as essential to cultural knowledge through descriptors such as 'classic' and 'foundational'" and placing

White authors' "experiences and language as aspirational and superior" (Worlds and Miller 44–45).

Challenging the Eurocentrism and Whiteness of canonical texts is met with backlash in part because "to identify a school or program as nonwhite in any way is to diminish its reputation or status" (Ladson-Billings and Tate 60). Perhaps unsurprisingly, canonical literature maintains a gravitational pull on AP and IB curricula, despite calls from English educators to change (Miller; Miller and Slifkin). English educator Arthur Chiaravalli argues that "AP English Literature and Composition by its very nature privileges whiteness and a white view of literature." Placing students of color in AP and IB classrooms that maintain racist beliefs is a form of oppression, despite the benefits AP and IB courses may provide. Enrollment policies are a first step in challenging White supremacy. We must also change the curriculum and pedagogy within de-tracked courses.

ORGANIZING AND DISRUPTING

Addressing White supremacy in English contexts requires multiple strategies. In this column, we offer an approach for challenging the interconnected White supremacy of tracking systems and canonical texts. English teachers should consider the following steps (which are by no means exhaustive):

1. Lead a departmentwide read on the effects of tracking and consider how tracking operates within your English

department. As a group, analyze demographic student data about who is enrolled in honors, AP, and IB courses. Then, critically examine criteria and gatekeeping mechanisms for honors, AP, and IB enrollment. Collect data to name the ways the tracking systems maintain racial hierarchies and connect your local data with national data. Use the result of this work as a document to begin conversations about de-tracking English courses.

2. Work with your department to review the curriculum associated with honors, AP, and IB courses. Consider whose stories are centered. Also, address the ways assessment practices uphold certain ways of knowing at the expense of other literacies students hold. Imagine new forms of assessment that meet the demands of honors, AP, and IB regulation and incorporate the multiple ways of knowing and literacies students practice outside of school.
3. Collaborate with students and community members to co-construct new policies for course enrollment and curricular decisions. Draw on community knowledge to consider what types of texts should construct curriculum and what structures are needed to support students who have traditionally been denied access to honors, AP, and IB enrollment.

These steps represent ideas and actions that have been helpful in our own contexts. The specific sociopolitical landscape of particular schools will shape the action steps that are achievable at the moment and which action steps will require building a coalition of actors beforehand. The work of disrupting and challenging White supremacy within our schools is multifaceted. Dismantling tracking systems and canonical curriculum must be part of that work. **EJ**

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