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## Repairing Wounds and Promoting Belonging and Resiliency in a Tracked English Classroom

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**Repairing Wounds and Promoting Belonging and Resiliency in a Tracked English  
Classroom**

by

Emily Wolper

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial  
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the department chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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### **Abstract**

A large body of research shows that academic tracking has the potential to negatively impact a student's feeling of belonging on campus. However, students express a greater sense of belonging when they take classes with students who mirror some aspect of their identity. The purpose of this study was to understand the complex ways in which students in tracked or low-level classes develop their identity as learners and experience belonging at school with a predominantly white students and staff. Participants included students who were enrolled in Academic English and Support English classes during the 2017-2018 school year. Support students participated in one focus group, and all students participated in an anonymous survey. Two teachers in the Support program also were interviewed for the study. This study found that schools can avoid some of the pitfalls of the tracking system by building programs that explicitly recognize and work to remedy students' complex and often negative past experiences with school. When students have a history of negative experiences at school, individual teachers must work to regain the trust of the student to help the student in constructing a more hopeful vision of their future. Alongside this, the study found that meaningful relationships with teachers and peers help students develop greater resiliency and feelings of belonging on campus. The findings demonstrate the importance of strengths-based instruction and social-emotional learning in the classroom to help students build resilience and develop attainable goals for the future.

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## **Introduction**

Some schools believe that the most equitable road toward closing the opportunity gap is to segregate its students (Modica, 2015). For decades, proponents of academic tracking have argued that separating students based on academic skill makes it more feasible for students to receive greater attention and tailored curriculum (Oakes, 1986). While these schools are not openly promoting racial segregation, such practices on high school campuses create the conditions for the perpetuation of de facto segregation. In most public schools, students are typically grouped into different academic tracks based on their academic skill and recommendations by previous teachers. If a school sees a student as someone who possesses strong academic skills and potential, that student may be placed in high-track classes which can include advanced, honors, and Advanced Placement courses. On the opposite end would be a student who, for a variety of reasons, the school does not perceive to be on track to attend a four-year university immediately following high school. This student would likely find herself placed in low-track classes that give her credits to graduate, but that are not designed to prepare her for post-secondary academic work.

In practice, many argue that academic tracking perpetuates segregation and accompanying racist ideologies by primarily grouping white students into high-track classes, and students of color in low-track classes (Blaisdell, 2016; Modica, 2015; Oakes, 1986). They posit that this de facto segregation has serious impacts on student performance and experience at school. By restricting access to meaningful, and sometimes even grade-level, academic experiences for students in low-track classes, tracking severely hurts student motivation and

intensifies differences between students (Blaisdell, 2016; Karlson, 2015; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

However, when tracking is examined next to theories of belonging and critical race theory, unexpected consequences emerge. This paper will use Ladson-Billings and Tate's framework of critical race theory, which asserts that inequity in the United States is fundamentally linked with race, and that race either affords or restricts access to social capital (1995). For these researchers, the understanding that whiteness is a form of property and that society in United States is based on property rights gives insight into the ways in which education perpetuates racial inequity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Many students of color who do not possess this property of whiteness are not granted access to the same educational experiences as their white peers (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In the racialized space of high school campuses, students of color often feel excluded from the larger culture of the school; their response to this exclusion is often to form their own clusters of support and camaraderie (Datnow & Cooper 1997; Mayer & Tucker, 2010; Villalpando, 2003). This coping mechanism is not surprising. Researchers propose that belonging is in fact a human need, not merely a want, and that most of our choices and actions in life are in search of satisfying that need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Scannell & Gifford, 2017). In an academic setting, if students do not feel connected to their school, many seek out meaningful and identity-affirming friendships to satisfy their need to belong (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005; Mayer & Tucker, 2010). Moreover, research suggests that there are social-emotional and academic benefits to same-race friendships (Datnow & Cooper 1997; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005; Villalpando, 2003).

### **Statement of Purpose**

Examined in isolation, tracking appears to be unambiguously harmful for students in low-track classes (Blaisdell, 2016; Modica, 2015; Oakes, 1986). The majority of research focusing on the impact of tracking on those in low-track classes reveals the multifaceted ways in which it can harm students, from negatively impacting academic performance to reinforcing racist stereotypes (Blaisdell, 2016; Karlson, 2015; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Modica, 2015; Oakes, 1986). Yet theories of belonging add a wrinkle to this conversation by showing the importance and value of friendships in general, and of same-race friendships for students of color on majority-white campuses. During adolescence, friendships that contribute to feelings of belonging have powerful and lasting impacts, academically and socially. Same-race peer networks support these feelings of belonging and are also shown to promote academic achievement and affirmation of identities (Datnow & Cooper 1997).

When brought together, critiques of tracking and theories of belonging raise key questions about the possibilities for schools to empower students of color. Researchers have found that when students are given opportunities to form same-race peer networks, these associations can benefit students in many ways (Datnow & Cooper 1997; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005; Villalpando, 2003). The current research suggests that when students form ethnic or racial identity-affirming groups in an academic context, those students have greater academic success, more feelings of belonging at school, and a stronger cultural identity. However, the current academic research primarily looks at private schools or universities and organized clubs or similar groups that exist on campus outside of the classroom (Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Villalpando, 2003). Research has not yet examined at the possibility for the application of this theory to situations within the public high school classroom.

Given that students of color and students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds are overrepresented in low-track and support classes, the purpose of this study was to discover how these often-marginalized students experience belonging and achievement in a school with predominantly white students and staff. This study also explored the ways in which students form relationships with their peers and teachers, and the impact these relationships had on their academic goals and motivation in school. Finally, this study looked at the impact of school programs and actions by other students and teachers on students' experiences in school as well as on their understanding of their identity as learners.

### **Significance of Study for Audience**

A primary goal of this research is to learn about the experiences of students in support and low-track classes so that teachers and schools can improve their programs and classes to address their unique needs. At the school site where the research took place, the population hovers around 1,600 students. The typical class size of an academic course ranges from 30 to 36 students, while support classes have a cap of 25 students. Low-track English classes have no cap, although they rarely enroll more than 25 students, with the number decreasing throughout the year as students drop out or transfer to a nearby continuation school.

This study hopes to develop strategies for teachers to help students in low-track and support classes find a sense of belonging on campus and develop a positive outlook on their education. Many students quietly move through high school feeling like they do not belong at school and that the school fails to prepare them for success (Lam, Chen, Zhang, & Liang, 2015). By working with support students in this research, my goal was to identify ways in which

teachers and schools can make real change to these classes, as well as others, to improve the lives of students both in and out of school.

While racial and ethnic demographics show that student populations are becoming more diverse, schools are rapidly resegregating (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014). Access to meaningful and equitable educational experiences is restricted for many students, and this project hoped to uncover strategies teachers can deploy to resist the policies and practices that create conditions for the continuation of the achievement and opportunity gap.

### **Summary of Methods**

This study uses a mixed-methods approach to research. Participants included thirty students who were enrolled in either a ninth grade Support English class and a ninth grade Academic English class during the 2017-2018 school year. Nine students in Support English participated in one focus group. Thirty students in both Academic and Support English completed an anonymous survey, to help place in context the data from the focus group. Two Support English teachers at the school site were interviewed.

### **Summary of Findings and Implications**

This study found that students in all classes, not just low-track and Support classes, struggle to experience belonging on campus. While participants brought to light the multifaceted ways in which they experience exclusion and judgement, they also revealed that identity-affirming friendships and supportive relationships with teachers can counteract some of the negative experiences at school.

Teachers, schools, and districts can use the findings to develop new curriculum and policy. Based on the findings, teachers can offer greater support to all students by adopting a strengths-based approach to teaching, and by creating a classroom space that makes room for the development of supportive relationships with and among students. Schools and districts can develop programs around social-emotional learning, and create common language and goals around the topic of emotional wellness. Finally, this research promotes social justice by shedding light on the experiences of often-marginalized students in the effort to provide teachers and schools with tools to better serve these students.

## Literature Review

This research sets out to understand the ways in which students from underrepresented populations in low-track classes experience belonging and academic success in a high school with predominantly white teachers and students. The research will examine how specific actions and decisions made by both the school and individual teachers impact students' understanding of themselves as individual learners and as members of an academic community. As student populations in public schools in the United States are becoming increasingly diverse, teachers are still overwhelmingly white (Haynes, 2017).

The following sections aim to provide readers with a review of the numerous critiques of tracking and issues related to feelings of belonging and same-race friendships on campus. When examined together, they reveal valuable insight into the multifaceted experiences of adolescents who are forced to navigate the racial space of high school (Blaisdell, 2016).

The review of existing research on the negative consequences of tracking will cover three main areas. First, this review will address the specific critiques researchers have made against tracking, including the impact of tracking on academic motivation. A large body of research has explored the connection between placement in low-track classes and dwindling motivation to perform at school (Karlson, 2015; Oakes 1985; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lam, Chen, Zhang, & Liang, 2015). Second, this review will examine issues of access for students in low-track classes. Research shows that when students are placed in low-track classes, they receive fewer opportunities to engage in meaningful academic experiences, including access to grade-level academic content (Blaisdell, 2016; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Oakes, 1986). The third major critique of tracking that this review will address has deep roots in America's fraught history of racial inequities. This section will acknowledge the discriminatory nature of tracking,

particularly the ways in which tracking perpetuates racial segregation and stereotypes (Blaisdell, 2016; Modica, 2015; Oakes, 1986; Tyson, 2011; Villalpando 2003).

This review will then shift its focus to examine issues of belonging, attachment, and friendships, and the varied way they impact the lives of students' at school. Specifically, this section of the review will consider the benefits of experiencing belonging at school, and whether that feeling emerges from a sense of attachment to the school itself or to a group of friends. When students enjoy a sense of belonging at school, benefits include increased chances of academic success as well as comfort and security on campus school (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005; Scannell & Gifford, 2017). Not all students feel immediately attached to their place of learning, but students strive to fill their need to belong through developing specific friendships while at school (Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). The review will go on to explain the benefits of the formation of friendships in general, and of same-race relationships in segregated academic settings (Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005; Villalpando, 2003).

### **Critiques of Tracking**

In public high schools across the United States, students are enrolled in different levels of core classes ostensibly according to their academic skills and interests (Oakes, 1985). High school academic tracking separates students into different courses that boast not only varying degrees of academic rigor, but different and unequal opportunities for academic and professional advancement (Blaisdell, 2016). Researchers have identified academic tracking as an epicenter of equity issues on high school campuses (Blaisdell, 2016; Karlson, 2015; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Modica, 2015). These researchers have identified three major ways that tracking harms



students, particularly those in low-track classes. Tracking negatively impacts student motivation, it restricts access to meaningful academic content, and it promotes racist stereotypes including notions of white supremacy (Blaisdell, 2016; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Modica, 2015; Karlson, 2015).

### **Motivation and tracking.**

Students' class schedules are based on a combination of perceived academic ability, teacher recommendations, and personal preferences. When a student receives a schedule filled either with predominantly low-track or predominantly high-track classes, research has shown that the student will interpret the class schedule to be a statement about who the student is as a person (Karlson, 2015). Many students understand their class schedule to reflect their skills and abilities, which can have implications for their future opportunities, including whether they can expect to continue their education in college. Students understand that receiving admission to college is becoming increasingly competitive, and that if one does not have strong academic performance in high school, it is unlikely they will be admitted to their top school (Karlson, 2015; Oakes, 1985). When a student receives a schedule filled with low-track classes, that student will infer that the school does not expect that student to go to college after high school (Karlson, 2015). In these situations in which a student does not believe he or she will go to college, motivation to do well in high school rapidly diminishes (Karlson, 2015). Most students in low-track classes do not see the practical implications to continue to work hard in high school if they know their academic future will end when they receive their diploma.

Through their assigned classes, students believe schools are telling them that they are destined for, or restricted to, a certain type of future that may or may not include college

(Karlson, 2015; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In a study of 10th grade English and math students, Karlson (2015) found that students do “revise their educational expectations” based on the information the school telegraphs to them through their course placement (p. 133). Based on decisions by the school about course placement, students adjust their understanding of themselves and their expectations for their future, which is reflected in their motivation to perform in the classroom. In their research on the impact of emotions on academic success, Lam, Chen, Zhang, and Liang (2015) offer additional insight into the question of motivation and academic success. The researchers found that when students feel hopeless or when they lack expectations for academic success, their motivation plummets. Assigning students a schedule filled with low-track classes limits their opportunities for their future, which results in an increased presence of negative emotions and decreased motivation (Karlson 2015; Lam, Chen, Zhang & Liang, 2015).

Additionally, as high schools promote and praise academic success, when students hear from the school they they are “low-track kids” with no future in college, they internalize the message and believe they are “low-achieving individuals” cast aside by the school (Karlson, 2015; Oakes, 1985). On the other side, when a student hears that the school believes he or she should be in classes for high-achieving students, that student will believe that he or she is a “high-achieving” individual with great prospects and opportunities (Karlson, 2015). Evidence shows that when students pick up schedules in the fall, they read more than names and room numbers on the page (Karlson, 2015; Oakes, 1985). Despite this body of work criticising tracking, the majority of high schools still maintain academic tracking.

**Tracking restricts access.**

Schools and teachers often justify the practice of academic tracking by explaining how it is a response to the diversity of experiences and abilities on high school campuses (Modica, 2015). Proponents of tracking argue that schools must separate students by academic level to be able to give all student more attention and increased time with the specific skills they need to succeed academically and professionally (Oakes, 1986). Increased attention and differentiation are indeed connected to academic success, but tracking fails to make good on these promises to students in low-track classes (Oakes, 1986). In practice, this stratification creates factions of students that become increasingly divided the more time spent in different tracks (Oakes, 1986). Over time, initial differences between students in high and low tracks become exacerbated. Research even shows that students' IQ scores decreased after spending a year in low-track classes (Oakes, 1986). In practice, instead of providing opportunities for students to learn or relearn valuable skills that will help them move up to higher tracks, students in low-track classes are effectively trapped in place, with restricted access to relevant and meaningful educational experiences (Blaisdell, 2016; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Blaisdell (2016) shares some cases in which schools recognize that students in low-track classes need supplemental academic support to succeed in school. Yet, even when schools provide students in low-track classes with additional supports, Blaisdell (2016) points out that the services are often inadequate. Blaisdell (2016) writes that it may look like some students in tracked classes are receiving additional educational supports in the form of reading specialists or other trained professionals, but the curriculum they work with is regularly below grade-level. The teachers, too, are more likely to have less experience than those assigned to high-track classes. These supports are ineffective in delivering meaningful and grade-level learning

opportunities to students. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) add another dimension to the conversation by arguing that students of color in low-track classes or underserved schools are regularly excluded from opportunities to engage with “‘rich’ (or enriched)” educational materials which are often reserved for high-track students (p. 54). They argue that historic racial economic inequities are reflected in the educational opportunities available to low-track students of color. Just as students of color have been historically excluded from “rich” educational experiences, current practices of academic tracking maintain that tradition of inequities. Oakes (1986) has observed a similar trend related to the preservation of economic equities through academic tracking. Even within vocational tracks, Oakes (1986) observed that students of color were overrepresented in programs designed to train students to enter “the lowest-level occupations” (p. 14). While many students in low-track classes miss out on meaningful learning experiences, students of color are the most severely affected by the inequities (Oakes, 1986).

### **Perpetuation of racial segregation through tracking.**

While proponents of academic tracking claim that students are sorted into tracked classes according to academic ability levels, in reality race plays a significant role in determining the track assigned to a student (Blaisdell, 2016; Modica, 2015; Oakes, 1986; Villalpando 2003). In theory, all students in an integrated school should have equal access to all types of classes, yet research shows that this is not the case in schools with academic tracking (Blaisdell, 2016; Modica, 2015; Oakes, 1986; Villalpando 2003). Studies found that students of color are overrepresented in low-track classes, and that they regularly have to work with inadequate curricula and inexperienced teachers (Blaisdell, 2016; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Oakes, 1986). Students of color are more likely to be placed in low-track classes than white students

who have the same academic abilities (Mayer & Tucker, 2010). Students of color are underrepresented in AP and honors classes, and have less access to “enriched” education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In integrated schools, even in those with messages promoting integration, de facto segregation is maintained through the practice of academic tracking (Blaisdell, 2016; Dreyer & Singh, 2016; Tyson, 2011).

When the pervasive culture is still struggling with racist ideologies, the school site is bound to echo those racist beliefs and practices (Dreyer & Singh, 2016). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) echo W.E.B. Du Bois when they suggest that the color line is the most powerful force at play in determining student access to meaningful educational experiences. Examining tracking sheds light on the ways in which schools are racialized spaces that create divisions between students, rather than bring students together (Blaisdell, 2016). Modica (2015) describes the racial division created by tracking as “a boundary marker for students” that restricts access and forces students into prescribed and limiting roles (p. 79). This racialized division instills in students notions about academic achievement and race. When students of color represent the majority in low-track classes as white students fill most of the seats in AP classes, schools perpetuate the association of academic achievement with whiteness (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Modica, 2015). Students perceive certain trends at school, and they make inferences based on their observations. Modica (2015) found that prior to coming to high school, most students do not make any connections between race and academic excellence. Modica writes that the association of whiteness with academic success starts in adolescence when students are first exposed to the racial lines between students that schools draw. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) take a historical approach to this idea when they posit that because white European-Americans

historically have had greater access to quality education, schools continue to reflect that inequity in their representations of and assumptions about academic success.

When students of color do manage to break through the barriers of entry and enroll in high-track AP or honors classes, they are acutely aware of their race (Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Modica, 2015). Many experience feeling like outsiders in an academic environment from which they have been all but completely excluded (Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Modica, 2015). Datnow and Cooper (1997) found that many students of color feel like outsiders as they inhabit predominantly white academic spaces. Consequently, they feel less connected to teachers and the school overall, which impacts academic achievement (Datnow & Cooper, 1997). Inside the high-track classroom, many students of color feel the need to censor themselves or refrain from participating in class to remain innocuous and inoffensive (Modica, 2015). Many often also feel forced to inhabit the role of “ambassador” of their race, and describe double-standards for behavior, specifically that they must behave better than their white peers to “legitimize” their presence in the class (Modica, 2015). These students would likely agree with Octavio Villalpando’s (2003) belief that “our white supremacist society emphasizes assimilation to white, European-American values, norms, and practices” (p. 640). Datnow and Cooper (1997) express that students of color in high-track classes feel “caught between two cultures,” as they attempt to integrate with their white peers while still striving to maintain their own identities (p. 57). This system forces many students to feel outright excluded from the dominant culture, or stuck between two worlds, searching to find a place to belong (Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Modica, 2015; Villalpando, 2003).

## **Belonging and Attachment**

Tracking not only takes a toll on a student's academic experience at school, students are emotionally affected by academic tracking and many report feeling intense exclusion at school (Blaisdell, 2016; Oakes, 1986; Modica, 2015). As decades worth of research has shown, humans have a deeply rooted desire to dispel feelings of exclusion and strive to feel like they belong (Freud, 1930; Maslow, 1943; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Scannell & Gifford, 2017). If a school does not make a student feel like he or she belongs, some may withdraw, while others decide to forge their own path to belonging (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). In the face of this structural racism, some students demonstrate profound resilience and flexibility in their search for belonging as they carve out spaces to form their own supportive academic communities, populated with individuals who share similar academic and social aspirations (Datnow & Cooper 1997; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005; Mayer & Tucker, 2010; Villalpando, 2003).

Research discussing our human need for belonging is far from new. From Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) to Maslow's "A Theory on Human Motivation" (1943), researchers demonstrated that there are tangible social and emotional values when one feels like one belongs. More recently, researchers Baumeister and Leary echo earlier scholars when they argue that the need to feel like one belongs is at the root of our motivation and many of our actions as individuals (1995). When this need to belong is satisfied, the individual receives a range of positive psycho-social benefits (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Scannell & Gifford, 2017). With increased understanding of the value of belonging, researchers recently have set out to explore the ways in which belonging impacts student experiences at school.

**Belonging and academic achievement.**

Researchers discuss place attachment as a “cognitive-emotional bond to a meaningful setting” (Scannell & Gifford, 2017). Individuals develop place attachments for a variety of reasons. Sharing interests and experiences, as well as mere proximity, create conditions for individuals to form bonds with one another (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Hamm and Faircloth (2005) found that students who have a strong sense of attachment to their school and those who believe that they belong on their campus are more likely to experience academic success.

In the school setting, when a student feels attached to his or her school, there are particular emotional outcomes that directly support student learning. Scannell and Gifford (2017) suggest that feeling attached to a particular place gives an individual a sense of “comfort and security,” both materially and psychologically (p. 261). These psychological benefits correspond to stronger academic performance in school (Reynolds, Lee, Turner, Bromhead, & Subasic, 2017). Feeling “at ease” in a particular place allows an individual to shift his or her attention away from worries or fears (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In an academic environment, this allows students to be more psychologically open to learning new academic material. When students feel at ease in school, Krashen (1981) argues that their “affective filter” lowers, making them more receptive to learning new material. Krashen discussed the “affective filter” in terms of language acquisition, which offers a useful framework for discussing the ways in which emotions and psychological states impact a student’s ability to take in new material. This “affective filter” can be seen as an invisible wall between an individual and academic content. The current emotional state of the individual is a factor in determining whether or not that academic material can make it through the barrier (Krashen, 1981).



In their research on school climate and academic achievement, Reynolds, Lee, Turner, Bromhead, and Subasic (2017) add a new dimension to the conversation about feelings of belonging in a school setting. They argue for recognizing the importance of identity when discussing belonging on school campuses (p. 82). They believe that when individuals feel like they can identify with the school, their behavior adjusts to mirror the goals and values of the school. This means students who feel more connected to their school are more ready to modify their behavior to fit in with the presiding culture of the school (Reynolds, Lee, Turner, Bromhead & Subasic, 2017).

### **The role of friendship in supporting attachment.**

Scannell and Gifford (2017) have found that belonging can be understood to be a positive result of feeling attached to a particular place. Their research shows that for the majority of individuals, when they are attached to a place they receive the benefits of feeling like they belong in that place (p. 261). This feeling of belonging means they experience both social acceptance and appreciation, emotions that have significant implications for adolescents (Lam, Chen, Zhang, & Liang, 2015). For a student to feel like he or she belongs in a school, research suggests that the student must see a value to being a part of the school, and that the school itself values the student (Lam, Chen, Zhang, & Liang, 2015). Additionally, to feel a sense of a belonging, the student should see that his or her values and beliefs are reflected in the school community as a whole (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005).

Many students of color report feeling unaccepted and not valued at school (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). Without these feelings of acceptance and appreciation, students struggle to become attached to their school (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). Moreover, without this attachment,

their own sense of belonging in that space is less secure (Lam, Chen, Zhang, & Liang, 2015). Yet, given that belonging is an innate human need, students continue to seek ways to fill this desire to belong through other venues (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Although place attachment is one path toward belonging, many students who do not feel attached to a school create these feelings of belonging in other ways. If a student does not feel supported by, or attached to, their school, that student may seek refuge in peer groups (Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). Through these friendships, many adolescents are able to find a sense of belonging on an otherwise alienating school campus (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). In addition to supporting the emotional lives of the students, these school-based friendships can support students' academic endeavors, offering practical support that the school might not provide (Datnow & Cooper, 1997). In their study of ethnic homogeneity in friendships, Leszczensky and Pink (2015) observed that the majority of friendships at school occur between students who share classes with one another (p. 24). Their findings are aligned with Baumeister and Leary's (1995) notions about proximity acting a primary reason individuals form connections with one another. When students form attachments with their peers in class, they make opportunities to support one another with the specific demands of their classes, and they create shared experiences, which further support their bonds (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005).

### **Paths Toward Belonging Through Same-Race Friendships**

In the racialized space of high school campuses, students of color often feel excluded from the pervasive culture of the school (Blaisdell, 2016; Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). To combat feelings of exclusion and to create social supports for one another,

students of color often form same-race friendships to support one another socially and academically (Datnow & Cooper 1997; Mayer & Tucker, 2010). Researchers have shown that students regularly form friendships along racial or ethnic lines, and most often with students in the same grade level (Leszczensky & Pink, 2015). In the past, researchers have considered this behavior to be “self-segregating” and harmful for students of color, but Villalpando (2003) argues that this behavior can, in fact, be beneficial. Villalpando (2003) rejects the “myth of racial balkanization” which states that students of color are responsible for maintaining segregated academic spaces (p. 619). Believers in “racial balkanization” place the blame of the perpetuation of segregation on students of color, rather than on the presence of structural racism. Furthermore, the racial balkanization myth posits that forming connections with students of the same racial or ethnic background can be detrimental to the success of those students, a theory that perpetuates deficit theories of race (p. 620). Villalpando’s (2003) research explicitly rejects these views and argues that same-race association can indeed benefit students of color in their academic pursuits and in their development of “cultural resources and assets” (p. 621).

In their research at private schools around Baltimore, Datnow and Cooper (1997) also discovered ways in which same-race peer networks can provide numerous benefits to students of color in predominantly white schools. They found that students of color students did not feel connected to their schools, despite recognizing the efforts of the school to support their inclusion in academic life (p. 62). Many minority students at these schools reported feeling alienated and excluded in the predominantly white environment (p. 57). The school environment did make room for students to come together to form their own same-race peer networks which proved to be a locus for academic and social support for students of color (p. 62). These social groups gave

students opportunities to support one another academically, and ensure they stayed on track to graduate (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005).

Mayer and Tucker (2010) argue for school programs with the explicit goal of bringing together students of color to support one another academically. These researchers discovered that for some students of color, it was not socially acceptable to have serious academic pursuits (p. 480). They discussed the ways that for many students of color, academic motivation runs counter to their culture at home. Yet, they argue that when academic peer groups are specifically designed to bring together students with the same racial or ethnic identity, students are able to support one another stay on track academically, while creating their own culture for academic success (p. 481).

Villalpando (2003) offers a slightly different perspective and posits that bringing students together to form same-race academic networks can support the development of “cultural resources and assets that sustain and foster positive dispositions among individuals” (p. 621). Villalpando (2003) found when Chicana/o students come together on university campuses, they are able to maintain their cultural identities, and use these identities to guide their academic work (p. 634). Villalpando (2003) found that same-race peer groups give members opportunities to strengthen their cultural identities and reflect on the barriers they had to surpass to gain entrance in white-dominated academic spaces. Datnow and Cooper (1997) similarly argued that same-race networks gave students of color “space” to discuss issues relating to race and identity and academic life (p. 66). These spaces helped students develop their own identities as students of color, as well as increase their visibility on campus (p. 67).

## Conclusion

It is well established that tracking harms students in numerous ways, from perpetuating racial segregation and stereotypes to draining student motivation. When students are placed in segregated classrooms, schools allow for the continuation of the United States' history of racial segregation and discrimination (Blaisdell, 2016; Dreyer & Singh, 2016; Tyson, 2011). Research has found that the barriers between high and low tracks often are drawn along racial and ethnic lines, with an overrepresentation of students of color in low-track classes and an underrepresentation of students of color in high-track classes (Blaisdell, 2016; Modica, 2015; Oakes, 1985; Villalpando 2003). Researchers have discovered a disturbing side-effect of this is that students infer that academic success must be linked to whiteness, unwittingly perpetuating notions of white supremacy (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Modica, 2015). When students of color break through the barriers placed upon them and enroll in high-track classes, many report feeling like “ambassadors” of their race who are more heavily scrutinized than their white peers (Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Modica, 2015).

Additionally, academic tracking trains students to believe that racial boundaries exist in education (Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Modica, 2015). They learn that forces outside of their control determine which side they fall on, and that their future might already be predetermined (Karlson, 2015).

Tracking affects students' thoughts and aspirations for their future. As Karlson (2015), Oakes (1985), and Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) found, when students are placed in tracked classes, their motivation plummets. They do not see a future for themselves in higher education, and without that academic goal, many students see fewer reasons to strive for academic excellence. Karlson (2015) added to the conversation by addressing the issue of self-worth, and

the ways in which a student's sense of self-worth is connected to his or her academic placement. When a school gives a student a schedule with low-track classes, Karlson (2015) found that the student interpreted that to mean that he or she is a "low-track individual" with "low-track prospects." In a culture that promotes academic excellence, this can have serious consequences.

Research on attachment and belonging also shed light on the nuances of student experiences in high school. Hamm and Faircloth (2005) found the students who feel at home on campus are more likely to experience academic success. When students feel attached to their school, they receive the emotional and practical benefits that come along with feelings of belonging (Reynolds, Lee, Turner, Bromhead, & Subasic, 2017). Yet, many adolescents do not feel any particular attachment to their school (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). Instead, students find ways to fill their need to belong through their association with friends (Datnow & Cooper, 1997). Many students report that friendships are the reason they come to school, and that in the school setting, friendships have the added benefit of providing additional academic support (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005).

In the racialized spaces of high schools, important research has shed light on the ways in which students of color find methods of coping with discrimination and exclusion. Students of color often find solace in same-race friendships that can offer familiarity and a variety of supports academically and socially (Datnow & Cooper 1997; Mayer & Tucker, 2010). Researchers found that these same-race friendships contribute to a student's sense of belonging at school, help support students' academic work, and have the potential to help strengthen cultural assets and identities (Mayer & Tucker, 2010; Villalpando, 2003).

Examined together, academic tracking, belonging, and the value of same-race friendships present an unexpected window into the experiences of high school students. Placement in low

academic tracks has the potential to negatively impact a student's motivation and feeling of belonging on campus, yet tracking may unexpectedly give students unique opportunities to create positive and beneficial connections within the classroom if they are able to foster same-race friendships that create a sense of belonging in school. In the research discussing the benefits of same-race peer relations, authors avoid entangling themselves with the widely rejected practice of academic tracking. Perhaps out of fear of inadvertently rationalizing segregation, or seeming to search for a "silver lining," little research exists about the nuanced ways in which students of color experience belonging and academic achievement in tracked classes in a public high school.

The purpose of this study is to use theories of belonging to understand the complicated and at times contradictory ways in which students in tracked or other low-level classes understand their place at school. This study examined the role of friendship at school, as well as the impact of relationships with teachers on student achievement and belonging. Finally, the study attempted to uncover how certain school programs influence the ways in which students experience their particular roles as learners and members of an academic community.

## **Methods**

### **Research Questions**

This project sought to understand the ways in which feelings of attachment and belonging impact the lives of low-track and Support students on an academically rigorous campus. The study worked to unpack the specific classes and experiences at school that contribute to students' feelings of belonging, and to discover what schools or individual teachers can do to support the development of student belonging. Specifically, this study endeavored to answer the following questions: How do students in low-track classes build peer relationships that create a sense of belonging at school? How do these classes and the relationships students form in these classes with their peers and teachers impact students' academic goals and motivation in school overall? How do these particular classes shape students' understanding of their academic identity and their role as learners? Finally, the study asked how students experience segregation at school. What is the degree to which students are conscious of segregation, and how does segregation at the class level impacts students' feelings of belonging at school?

### **Description and Rationale for Research Approach**

This study stems from my assignment to teach a ninth grade English Support class. I had never taught a Support class before, and after a few weeks of teaching this class, I became curious about how this class impacted the lives of the students. As I came to know my students, I learned that many of them had struggled in school, and in English in particular, for years. Because of these struggles, many had negative associations with school, with teachers, and with academics overall. For some students in the program, English was their second language; many had at least one parent who was not a fluent English speaker. At the same time, this was not a



designated English Language Learner class — others in the class were native speakers. What was striking about the classroom dynamic was that although each student had his or her own distinct set of reasons for being in this course, once they entered the room, the students seemed to form a cohesive unit. With minimal prompting from me, the students in the class became almost immediately comfortable sharing and working with one another. I observed that in Support, students generally participated more openly than they did in their Academic English class. These observations inspired me to explore and understand how their hours spent in this class, and the meaning they made of their presence in the class, impacted their sense of who they were as students and as individuals.

This motivation prompted me to develop a phenomenological and constructivist approach to research. This form of inquiry places significant weight on the experiences of specific individuals as they are expressed by the individuals in question. This approach allowed me to focus on the meaning that the individuals made of their own experience in context. It offered a glimpse of the world through their eyes. The main goal of a phenomenological design of inquiry became uncovering the essence the lived experiences of those in the study.

This approach helped me work alongside and with my students to understand their truths about the workings of the school and their own experiences. While I could look at the class and their skills and draw my own conclusions about the ways they walked through their academic life, that approach would only reveal a small corner of the tapestry of their experience. When I realized that I wanted to understand how the English Support program, including my role as their white, female teacher, impacted their experience as students, I knew I needed these individuals to guide the conversation. Their voices were essential in constructing the meaning of their experiences from their point of view.

While the heart of this research is qualitative, the study used a mix-methods approach to explore the multiple and complicated realities of high school students. Students in Support were involved in focus groups and participated in an anonymous survey. Students in Academic ninth grade English were only asked to participate in the anonymous survey. The survey functioned as tool to place the ideas expressed in the focus groups in context. To provide an additional frame of reference for the program, I interviewed two English Support teachers about their experience teaching Support.

## **Research Design**

### **The site.**

At Greenhill High, students in ninth and tenth grade have the opportunity to enroll in a course called English Support, which is directly linked with their college-prep Academic English class. The teachers of ninth and tenth grade English Support classes will also have all of their Support students in one of their sections of Academic English. The Support class is explicitly designed both to help students complete the specific college-prep coursework of their Academic English class and to provide students with the skills and tools to be successful in their other Academic classes. This is not a general study skills class; instead, it is a class where students receive extra help and guidance with their assigned Academic English work.

While the Support classes are not considered low-track English classes, the enrollment patterns are similar. Students who have struggled in school or who perform at a lower grade level are often recommended for Support. In the ninth grade Support class featured in this study, at the start of the year eighteen students were reading at or below a seventh grade level. Also, of the twenty students in Support who took the Smarter Balanced Assessments the previous year, only

10% met the ELA achievement standards. Like low-track classes, students of color are also overrepresented in these classes. In this Support class, twenty of the twenty-five students are students of color.

This school is known in the district for its academic rigor, and many teachers and students take pride in that recognition. The campus is also the least diverse high school in the district. During the 2017-2018 school year, 60% of its students identified as white, 21% identified as Hispanic, 9% as Asian, 6% as two or more races, 2% as black, 1% as American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 1% as Hawaiian Native or Pacific Islander. While the school is situated in the wealthier corner of the city, 19% of the school is considered economically disadvantaged. This number has increased in recent years, yet many within the larger community still maintain the belief that all students at this school are both wealthy and white. Students are aware of this stereotype, and depending on the student, knowledge of the wealthy, white student population stereotype plays a different role in shaping their perception of the school and their place in it.

I chose to conduct my research on this site because of my connection to, and investment in it as a teacher. I became curious about the lived experiences of students in my Support class, and I selected that class to be my primary research focus. While the purpose of this class is to help struggling students improve their academic skills, I wanted to look at other aspects of student life that may be connected to this course to understand the multifaceted experiences of the individuals in this class.

**The participants.**

The student participants were all students enrolled in one of my Academic English or English Support classes. At this school, students in English Support in ninth and tenth grade are concurrently enrolled in the same teacher's Academic ninth or tenth grade English class (these Support classes disappear at the eleventh grade). A student in one section of my Academic ninth grade English class who enrolled at the school with low reading and writing abilities and with specific teacher recommendations would likely be placed in my English Support class. That student would then have two classes with me as their English teacher. In one class, the student would be a heterogenous college preparatory Academic English course. In the Support class, the student would be with others who also needed an additional period of English to be able to complete grade-level work. Nine students in my ninth grade English Support class participated in focus group and survey to provide insight into the ways in which they experience school and their identity as students. Of these students, seven were male and two were female. Thirty mainstream ninth grade students also participated in the anonymous survey.

Two teachers who have experience teaching Support also participated in the study. Both of these teachers are white female teachers. One has over twenty years of experience, while the other has taught for five years.

**Methods**

I held a focus group with my English Support students during our normal class time. To avoid losing the voices of some of my quieter students, I began the focus group by asking students to complete a series of short journal prompts. They wrote responses to four main questions, and then we arranged our seats in a circle. Students were prompted to read their

responses to one of the four questions as we moved around the circle. We went around the circle four times to address each question. After each round, I opened up the floor for additional comments or questions from the students. The focus group dealt with issues of belonging on campus, experiences with academic success, motivation, and segregation. I collected their journals, and I recorded notes off site after the focus group took place.

During our normal Academic English class period, student participants took the anonymous survey. Questions on the survey asked students about their experiences with belonging, success, peer judgement, and diversity on campus. Students were also asked to reflect on their academic identity, racial and ethnic identity, and the role of teachers.

My study also featured interviews with two teachers who were involved with English Support. I held two 30-minute interviews with each of these teachers. I met with one teacher during two lunches, and I met with the other teacher twice after school.

### **Research Positionality**

The students I worked with in this study were enrolled in my English Support class, and one of my ninth grade Academic English classes. Although students understood that their comments and participation were completely divorced from their grade, before I even began collecting data, I knew that my role as their teacher would impact the participants. I attempted to shed the baggage of that role by encouraging them to take the conversation in directions that were meaningful for them. I did not police their language, and I ensured them that their comments were confidential. However, in addition to the baggage of simply being their teacher, I am a white, female teacher. The majority of my students in English Support are male students of

color. This likely played a role in students' willingness to discuss their feelings about race, racism, and segregation.

I endeavored to position myself as someone who saw them as experts. I also found myself needing to motivate them to willingly talk to me about personal issues. While plenty of students relish the opportunity to talk about themselves, others are more guarded. I explained to them that the purpose of this study was to use their insights to improve the classes that they likely will enroll in down the line. I repeatedly reminded them that students have tremendous power on campus, and to take advantage of that power, they need to make their voices heard. Students had a mixed response to this effort. While most students took this opportunity to discuss personal and potentially-uncomfortable topics at length, others were more reticent, preferring only to say or write a few words for each question.

### **Data Analysis**

The tension between student need for belonging and the critiques of tracking was examined in two stages. The data analysis process began with a general examination of the material to provide an initial narrative of the experiences of the students in the study. In that first round of analysis, focus group notes, surveys, and interview notes were coded for words or phrases related to belonging, attachment, exclusion, and peer judgement. Additional codes included words and phrases related to segregation, including references to race and family background. I created a final group of codes related to the role of teachers, academic goals, motivation, and success. After that first analysis of the data, a phenomenological approach was applied to the data analysis. This method emphasized a focus on examining specific words or phrases from the interviews, survey, and focus group to distill the essence of meaning in the data.

**Validity and Reliability**

I had worked with these students for over a semester before I began my research. Because of the small class sizes of the Support, the students and I were able to get to know each other in that time. This rapport allowed me to ask more personalized questions than I might have if I were working with strangers, and it gave me insight into the validity of their responses. Because I knew these students, I could sense when they were talking from the heart. It was also clear when they were omitting something or deflecting. Additionally, when I examined the themes and experiences that emerged in the focus group and those from the survey, the results were consistent. In the focus groups, students spoke about the issues in ways that echoed the survey results, further strengthening the validity of the data.

## Findings

Students in Support English understand that the school did not accidentally place them in the program — they know there is something about them that necessitated the placement. These students may be English language learners, they may have undiagnosed learning disabilities, they also might have experienced childhood trauma that has interfered with their ability to learn or even show up to school. They also may be athletes who need extra time to do their homework. They each have their own reasons for being in Support, and some feel that their reason sets them apart from the rest of the school. Many of these students have a history of struggling with academics, which manifests in a complicated relationship with school and with their own understanding of themselves as learners. These factors have the potential to make students feel excluded or othered on campus. In addition to harming a student's sense of belonging in an academic community, this feeling of otherness may have a detrimental impact on their developing identity as learners.

Yet, these feelings of otherness does not have to color their entire high school experience. Students in this study have learned to overcome negative experiences and build resilience at school when they have encountered opportunities to feel connected to their peers and teachers and when they believe the school supports their success in the classroom.

This chapter will begin by discussing the multifaceted ways in which students experience and respond to peer judgement. This first section will explore how students across academic levels feel judged by their peers because of the classes they take. All students in the survey referred to the presence of judgement, and many revealed that this judgement has a negative impact on their motivation and overall experience at school. Others, however, were more resilient in the face of judgement. These students had a clear and optimistic view of their



education; they understood their own strengths, and were largely undeterred by the judgement from peers.

This chapter will then consider the power that schools have in shaping a student's academic identity. Many students in the study reported having negative experiences in elementary and middle school that impacted their understanding of their identity as learners. The findings show that for Support classes to be successful in undoing the damage of previous classes, teachers and schools must understand and acknowledge students' past struggles in school. Teachers especially can focus on developing supportive relationships with students and highlighting students' strengths to build confidence and increase motivation in the classroom. Finally, this section will discuss the importance of supporting students in reevaluating their academic identity to help them visualize for themselves a hopeful future.

The final section of this chapter will discuss the ways in which identity-affirming relationships support student belonging at school. First, this section will present student perspectives on the value of same-race friendships at school, and the ways in which students feel more understood when they see others who look like them at school. Second, the section will discuss alternative forms of identity-affirming relationships, specifically identities based on academic ability. Third, this section will end with a discussion of race and the role of Support classes in supporting often-marginalized groups.

### **The Impact of Peer Judgement on Belonging and Identity as Learners**

#### **Responses to peer judgment.**

Students in this study believe that every aspect of their lives is vulnerable to the judgement of their peers. For some, this judgement greatly impacts the choices they make at school, in both harmful and helpful ways. Yet for students on the periphery of the dominant

school culture, this judgement can be alienating. While all participants in this study agree that judgement is ever-present, when students are able to find ways to manage or overcome the judgement of others, they feel more invested in their education and connected to the school overall.

The high school where I conducted my study places emphasis on academic excellence. While many students appreciate the intellectual challenge the environment provides, this atmosphere creates a breeding ground for insecurity and judgement. Of the 30 ninth graders in Academic and Support English who participated in the survey, every single one believed that students at their high school made assumptions about one another based on the classes they took. Although all students in the survey were enrolled in Academic English, the students represent a range of academic skills and experiences. Of these students, six were in Support English, while eight were enrolled in Honors math or science classes. The remaining students were only enrolled in Academic-level classes.

In their survey responses, students identified the experience of feeling judgement regardless of their academic level. One student in Support wrote, “people tell me I’m in Support classes and that I’m not smart.” Another student shared, “if you tell someone you’re in Support, they automatically assume you’re dumb.” A student in only Academic classes made note of the widespread judgement at school. This student found that “if you take a Support class, people assume that you’re immature or not smart. If people find out that you’re in an Honors/AP class, they assume you’re extremely smart and have little to no social life.” A student in both Academic and Honors classes shared her experience with judgement. She wrote, “people are so judgmental and it’s not even for just those who are in Support classes. This last week someone

said they did not like me because I was ‘too smart!’” In the eyes of these students, no one is shielded from the judgement of their peers.

While all students experience judgement, they do not all respond to it in the same ways. Some students saw the potential of peer judgement as a motivating force to dive deeper into academics. One student in Academic classes wrote the assumptions of others “make you want to take harder classes to seem that you are smarter.” Another student acknowledge how the judgement of others made her work harder at school, but that this was not an entirely positive experience. She discussed how the assumptions people made about her at school forced her “to stay on the track of everyone else and try to participate because of what they might think of me.” While these students interpreted the presence of peer judgement as a motivation to improve their academic performance, the tone of their answers suggests that this experience takes a toll on their emotional wellbeing.

Other students were more explicit about the negative impact of peer judgement on their lives, specifically on their academic motivation. A student in Academic classes wrote the assumptions people make about her make her feel “unimportant” and “scared to get things wrong.” She later wrote that this fear keeps her from participating in class.

Although students across the different academic levels experience judgement, many students in Support English voiced feeling judged simply for being in Support. Depending on their present understanding of their academic identity, students interpreted this judgement in different ways. For some students, peer judgement had a negative impact on their motivation and sense of agency. One student said, “people tell me I’m in Support classes and that I’m not smart, so I don’t try as hard.” Another student echoed this statement by saying, “people call me dumb so I don’t try.” During a focus group, after students discussed the ways they imagined those in

Honors view students in Support, several students shrugged their shoulders and said, “What am I supposed to do?” Another student, visibly frustrated by the topic, repeated several times, “I don’t care.” By experiencing this form of judgement, these particular students were left feeling misunderstood and powerless, and unsure of their own agency.

However, during this same discussion, certain students who appeared to possess a strong sense of self and self-worth had greater immunity to the slings and arrows of peer judgement. The students who were able to resist the stigmatization of being in Support and reject the judgement of their peers came to the class with an existing understanding of their identity as learners. One student expressed that whenever she felt judged, her self-esteem protected her from its negative consequences. She said, “if others think I’m not smart I usually prove them wrong. I always show people I can do something when they think I can’t, especially in sports and school.” Another student told the focus groups, “we’re in high school now. We just want help. It shouldn’t be such a big deal.”

Another student shared an understanding of the ways in which judgement is wrapped up in one’s own uncertainty about their place at school. He believed many students only cast judgement on one another to make themselves feel better about their own choices. In the focus group, he said:

Some of my friends or people that I talk to think I’m not smart because I have a Support class. It’s annoying because I know I’m pretty smart overall. I feel like they do this to categorize people and so they can make themselves feel better about the classes they take.

This student’s clear understanding of his own identity as a student allowed him to see through and ultimately reject the judgement of his peers.

**Rejecting judgement to invest in education.**

While many students may feel judgement from others about being in Support, students overcome the judgement and stay in the program because see the value in it. One Support student said, “people make fun of students when they are in Support classes. But, only the ones that understand are the students in Support. We get what it’s about.” Most students in ninth grade Support English continue on to tenth grade Support English. Of the twenty-five students in this section of ninth grade Support, twenty-one decided to stay in the program for their sophomore year. While they enter 9th grade Support based on teacher or parent recommendations, students do not automatically enroll in tenth grade Support — they need to express a desire to take the course. While their teacher or parents may encourage them to continue, the program emphasizes that the final decision for sophomore year falls on them.

While the students resent the judgement they experience, by staying in Support they show their refusal to allow it to interfere with their academic choices. By committing to stay in a program with explicit goals of helping improve academic achievement, these students are taking a stand and investing in their own education, no matter the perceived social consequences. For these students, the benefits of being in the program outweigh the negative. While many students express feeling judgement from others about the classes they take, by making the choice to be in the program, they are staking a claim in their education and in the belief that the school can work for them.

According to a teacher who has taught ninth grade Support for over eight years, when students are in this program they have more opportunities for academic success. This has implications far beyond their grade. She said:

In Support, when a kid is not used to having successes starts to have small successes, that makes them feel more connected. Support turns an “I can’t and I won’t” into at least an “I’ll try even if I’ll hate it.” When they have success, they fit in. They aren’t always getting called out for having the wrong answers or not knowing anymore.

According to this teacher, while students feel judged for being in this extra class, the skills they receive in this class allow them to feel more like they are a part of the academic community of the school. They start to see their own potential and are more likely to receive positive reinforcement in their classes, continuing the positive feedback loop. This is an essential step in helping students take ownership of their education and in repairing students’ relationship with school.

### **Repairing Wounds to Reinvest in Education**

#### **Encouraging buy-in.**

When schools have tracked classes or classes with similar enrollment patterns, schools can avoid some of the pitfalls of the tracking system by building programs that recognize and work to remedy students’ complex and often negative past experiences with school. My research found that many students in Support English classes come to high school with negative associations with school and with their own identity as learners. In the focus group, one student in Support said, “I don’t mind being at school, but I think it’s not for me. I’ve never been good at school.” Another said, “middle school made me hate school. Everyone made me feel dumb all the time. I’m glad things are different this year.” These students did not identify as strong students. Instead, they walked into the class feeling like deficient learners. Support English and similar classes are most effective when the structure of the classes and the teachers themselves

work to repair the wounds of students' past educational experiences to guide them in constructing a more hopeful vision of their future.

Students and teachers alike felt that before students reach high school, many have already developed negative associations with school in general, and with classes and programs designed to support struggling students in particular. In the focus group, one Support student openly discussed the rampant name-calling and mistreatment she received from classmates for taking special education classes in middle school. She shared, "people pushed me down so much and made me not want to go anymore." It was so harmful, she shared, that she ultimately dropped the class partway through her eighth grade year. When she saw that the school placed her in Support English at the start of ninth grade, she shared feeling worried about the social cost of taking this class. "I was afraid it'd be middle school all over again," she said. She shared her relief when, a few weeks into the year, she realized that the class was not here to emphasize her weaknesses, but to offer needed academic help. She said, "the school doesn't make me feel like there's something wrong with me."

A teacher who has taught ninth grade Support English for over eight years acknowledged that her story was not uncommon. She said:

Students enter ninth Support feeling like they are being punished. A lot of this has to do with what's happening in middle school. Once they see that I'm here to help, not shame them or give them extra work, they start to lose the self-consciousness.

**Teacher involvement.**

Teachers need to work diligently, she continued, to prove to students that they are committed to supporting students academically as well as emotionally during their time in the program. "It's all connected," this teacher said. "How can we hope to help them grow as students

if we don't support their emotional development, too? They need to feel good about us as teachers, and they need trust us to take care of them." She said she accomplishes this by "focus[ing] on strengths, rather than remind[ing] them what they are not good at. They see right away that I care. That I want them to succeed, and that I can help them do it."

For many students who have struggled in school, relationships with teachers have been contentious. To help students become motivated and invested in their education, teachers need to focus on building healthy relationships with students. The same Support teacher said:

It all comes down to relationships. Unless you create a relationship, they won't give a shit." You need to show them that you appreciate and accept them for who they are. Don't try to change them. Tell them that. Make sure they get it."

This teacher did acknowledge that there does not exist a universal process for this, however. She went to on share an example of the "only student all year" who did not improve academically:

His walls were just too high. Something must have happened to this person in the fourteen years before he got to me that made his barriers completely impenetrable all year. Nothing I did worked. Nothing any of his other teachers worked, either. But when you can't get through to a kid, you can't give up. Something might click someday. You never know. You have to keep trying.

"You just have to love them. If you don't love them, what are you doing here?" A tenth grade English Support teacher discussed in an interview the expansive role of the teacher. To help break down walls in a classroom to promote authentic connections and learning, she believes that teachers need to "be authentic. Students will model their own behavior after their



teacher's. If the teacher is vulnerable and authentic, the students will be, too." For this teacher, authenticity meant making herself vulnerable around students. She said:

When they see me struggle with something in my life, they realize that struggling is normal. Not something to be ashamed of. I also subject them to lots of stories that make me not look all that great. That's fine. That's the point. I want them to be honest with me, so I need to do that with them. It creates a space where we can be real, even if it doesn't always look pretty.

This teacher was quick to address the fact that her classroom and comfort-level might not be the norm. She said:

My way of running a classroom works for me. It won't work for everyone. If you don't want to reveal much about yourself, make it all about the students. Ask them personal questions. Get to know them as people before you know them as students. Even if you're a blank slate, at least you're a blank slate who cares.

Students echoed this sentiment as well. In the student focus group and survey, nearly all participants agreed that a teacher's individual and positive connection to a student increases student motivation, participation, and confidence in class. Students feel more comfortable and like they belong in a class when their teachers take the time to get to know them. During the focus group, several students addressed the ways in which student-teacher connections impacted their emotions while in class. One student shared, "when teachers take time to know you, you feel more connected." Another said having a connection to a teacher "might make me feel more relaxed, and less tense about teacher interaction or asking questions." In classes where students feel like their teachers make the effort to get to know them, they lower their defences and become more willing to engage with the class.

Of the thirty survey responses, five included the word “comfortable” in their answers describing the way student-teacher relationships impacted their experience in a class. Students feel like they can be themselves when their teachers get to know them. One student wrote in the survey, “If a teacher knows more about me, I feel more relaxed in the class. I don't have to put on a mask and act a certain way or pretend I'm someone else.” Echoing this statement, another student shared, “I feel like I can ask questions without being judged.”

Students acknowledged that having a relationship with a teacher encouraged them to participate more actively in class. One student wrote in the survey, “the better I get to know my teachers personally, the more I like them and the class. I usually do better if I feel like the teacher cares about me.”

Students also shared their feelings about a class when they are unable to forge a meaningful relationship with a teacher. In the focus group, one student voiced that when he feels like the teacher does not care about him, in class “you're just there to be there. Because you have to be there.” Another student eagerly jumped into the conversation and admitted that he felt most teachers “listen, but don't hear” their students. Another student added that they felt their teachers misunderstood or even ignored them entirely. When one student said, “why should we care about what you're saying if you don't care about us?” all other students silently nodded, expressions exuding stoicism.

### **Cultivating hope.**

At this high school which emphasizes academics and boasts the percentage of students it sends to four-year universities, students in Support are concerned. In the focus group, it became clear that these students are cognizant of the long-term impact of course selection in high school.

They believe that because they need Support English, they will not be as competitive as their peers in higher-level classes. One student remarked, “if you’re in Support, you’re not as smart. In Honors, you’re gonna have a better life.” These students were already envisioning their future, and lowering their expectations for themselves based on the classes they took. When asked what they saw for themselves in their future, one student said, “after graduation, you just have to see what happens.” With a shrug, the original student added, “you just gotta have hope.”

Teachers in the Support program recognize that many students lower their expectations for themselves based on their academic achievement. One Support teacher in an interview said that these classes are designed specifically to help underprivileged students “rise up to be competitive with other students who had more privilege. In Support, we can bring them up to function at a higher academic level.” The structure and philosophy of the class play a significant role in supporting students feel invested in their education, and ensuring that they do not lose hope.

### **Increased Feelings of Belonging for Students Who See Themselves in Peers**

#### **Connections to peers to build resiliency and establish roots.**

Students in the study expressed feeling more connected to the academic community when they could recognize aspects of themselves in their peers. In the survey and focus group, students in Support and Academic English alike discussed the importance of experiencing camaraderie with students who have similar identities. Students spoke of feeling kinship with those with similar racial or ethnic identities, as well as those who took similar classes. However, of all the student participants in the anonymous survey, only three students explicitly brought up race in their answers.

The students who discussed a shared racial or ethnic identity with other students were all students of color. One Latina student shared that in her Spanish for Spanish speakers class, most of the students shared a similar ethnic background. She said the class “makes me feel like not such an outcast.” At another point in the survey, she shared feeling like she does not typically feel like she “fits in” and “belongs.” At a school where she did not feel connected to the dominant culture, this class afforded her the opportunity to connect to an aspect of school life and feel less alienated. Similarly, another student shared that at this predominantly white high school, “it’s cool to relate to some Hispanic people about things most other white people can’t relate to.” A student who identified as Asian said she felt most at ease on campus with fellow Asians in an Asian Heritage Club on campus. In her own words, she explained, “the Asian population of 9th graders are tight-knit and social. I seem to feel more comfortable with them.”

In Support classes, students recognize and appreciate the fact that while they all might struggle with school, they are working together to become stronger students. Given the nature of the Support program, teachers give students space to be vulnerable and honest with one another. The relationships students form in this class based on their shared identity as Support students and in their shared experiences in the program help them feel more rooted as learners in their other classes. According to another Support teacher, Support students form a tight-knit group and “seek each other out” in their Academic classes for group or partner work. Through their shared time in Support, students create supportive bonds with one another.

In the focus group, students in Support discussed their similarities with one another in terms of their classes and academic levels, not their race. When they wrote about their feelings toward other students in Support, one student wrote, “because we have so many classes together, of course we’re going to become friends.” Another shared that, “I’m not afraid of being judged

here. How could they be judgemental when we're both here?" At no point did these students discuss that their shared racial or ethnic identities were a factor that brought them together. Even in the anonymous survey, not a single Support student acknowledged race as a factor that made them feel more or less connected to their peers. Students either skipped the question entirely, or wrote a version of "no," or "I don't know."

The tendency not to discuss race appeared elsewhere in the focus group. Students demonstrated that they did not have an accurate understanding of the racial demographics of the school. When I asked the focus group about racial segregation on campus and within classes, they shared that they did not believe it was an issue. One student even questioned the authenticity of the racial demographics of the school. A Latina student in Support said, "there are a lot more Latinos than [the statistics] say. I would say it was around 48% Latinos." At [name of HS], 60% of students are white, while 40% are students of color. In the anonymous survey, several students demonstrated a similar overrepresentation of their ethnic group. For example, in the survey, three white students wrote about how their classes were "mostly white," populated with "pretty much only white people," when in their particular Academic English class period, students of color represent one-third of the class population. Their overrepresentation of their racial identities may contribute to their sense of connectedness at school. If they believe more of the school looks like them, they may be more likely to feel like they belong.

In an interview with one teacher who has spent over eight years teaching in the program, she acknowledged the reality that the majority of students in Support are students of color. Despite the enrollment numbers, she did not believe that this class perpetuated racial segregation on campus the way that many tracked classes do. Instead, she said that these classes are designed

specifically to help underprivileged students “rise up to be competitive with other students who had more privilege. In Support, we can bring them up to function at a higher academic level.”

Another teacher who has been with the program for several years discussed the importance of seeing Support as a launching pad for students of color. After sophomore year, the Support classes go away and students have the opportunity to move up to AP English, continue with Academic, or move down to Survey. When considering who to recommend to move up an academic level, this teacher said, “it’s important to take more risks on students of color” and promote them to the next level.

### **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to uncover how students at a predominantly white, academically rigorous high school who are enrolled in low-track or similarly structured classes experience belonging and develop their identities as learners. Through interviews, surveys, and a focus group, the research discovered the widespread impact of feeling connected to peers and teachers. Students who reported feeling more connected to others at school had an easier time cultivating feelings of belonging. Additionally, these students were more capable of overcoming negativity related to school, including peer judgement, isolation, and a personal history of discouraging and demotivating experiences at school.

The findings from this research echoed some of the themes from previous research on academic tracking and the role of friendship for students of color. First, as outlined in the literature, student in this study were conscious of the present and future implications of the classes they took. As Karlson (2015) and Oakes (1985) discussed, students make inferences about themselves and their ability as learners based on their schedule of classes. A student will

look at her schedule of classes and according to the academic level, she will determine whether or not the school expects that student to go to college (Karlson, 2015). Depending on their schedule of classes, this can encourage students to invest further in their education, or withdraw from their education (Karlson, 2015). The literature also acknowledged that this lack of motivation impacts academic performance, and invokes a feeling of hopelessness in the student, which this current study also addresses (Karlson 2015; Lam, Chen, Zhang & Liang, 2015). Second, the findings from this study are in line with conclusions discussed in the literature that demonstrate students' academic success and feelings of belonging are tied to meaningful peer relationships (Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). Third, the findings around the academic and social-emotional value of same-race relationships are aligned with the literature (Datnow & Cooper 1997; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005; Villalpando, 2003).

Despite the similarities between the findings and the literature, this study revealed some new insights into the consequences of academic tracking and the impact of student-teacher relationships. While the literature made clear that the ways in which students understood their academic identity at school was often based on their assigned classes, the literature did not acknowledge the impact of peer judgement on students in low-track or similar classes. The findings of this research show that students feel like they are constantly under threat of the judgement of their peers about the classes they take. Students revealed that the feeling of being judged by peers was a primary cause of both their weakened motivation and negative outlook on their academic identity.

The findings of this study also deviated slightly from the literature on the topic of same-race friendships. While the literature discussed the importance of same-race relationships on student belonging, the findings found that students felt kinship with others who took the same

classes as they did. Students were more vocal about the impact of shared class experiences than they were about race. This finding was particularly significant for those who were in Support English. Their recognition of their similarities as students helped them feel more at ease in class together, which allowed them to support each other emotionally and academically in their Support class and in their Academic English class.

An unexpected finding that contrasted with prior research was that students were generally reticent around the topic of race. While some students did acknowledge that sharing a racial identity with a classmate helped them feel more connected, most students in the survey refused to spend much time discussing race. Several reasons might have kept students from talking about race. First, returning to the question of researcher positionality, the students of color in the study might have not felt comfortable discussing race with their white English teacher. Second, at this predominantly white school, students may have been socialized not to discuss or acknowledge race. Third, students might not have wanted to alienate their white classmates by openly discussing same-race friendships.

This research shows that while some students of color are vocal about the importance of same-race friendships, most students want to have some aspect of their identity mirrored by their peers, whether or not it involves race. The findings show that tracked or similar types of classes do afford students the opportunity to see themselves in their peers, which can be beneficial to their lives at school. The friendships many students form in those classes are academically supportive and identity-affirming, two factors which contribute to a student's increased sense of belonging at school.

These findings demonstrate for teachers the value of prioritizing student emotional wellness in their classrooms. While most students will encounter some adversarial experiences in



their lives as students, the findings show that the students most capable of overcoming negative experiences like peer judgement and previous academic difficulties are those who possess a positive outlook on their identity as learners. They understand their skills and potential, and they do not allow their peers' judgements to get in the way of their academic success. Teachers can develop strength-based strategies for all of their students to help students see their own value. To do this, teachers can intentionally facilitate discussions around success, different learning styles, and multiple intelligences. This may help foster in students a sense of confidence in school and in their own accomplishments. In addition, teachers can incorporate lessons about metacognition to help students recognize their own success, and set realistic goals. Teachers also can collaborate with one another to support students' goals across different disciplines. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that relationships with teachers can transform a student's experience in class and at school. Teachers can recognize that learning occurs best when students feel valued and respected by their teachers and use this understanding to develop meaningful connections with their students.

Beyond the classroom, districts can incorporate these findings to into existing programs or develop new initiatives aimed at student wellness and achievement. For example, many high schools and districts develop "graduate profiles" that feature specific qualities and skills that students ideally would possess by the time they graduate. Based on these findings, schools can see the importance of social-emotional learning, and incorporate these skills into their "graduate profiles."

Finally, these findings can foster social justice by demonstrating the importance of providing all students, particularly marginalized students, access to tools and relationships that can be emotionally and academically supportive and enriching. Instead of grouping low-

performing students together in remedial classes that emphasize students' shortcomings, schools and individual teachers have an opportunity to resist the harmful practices that perpetuate the opportunity gap in American public schools. By providing students with learning opportunities that can build confidence, promote belonging, and restore hope in their future, teachers and schools can make significant strides in reducing or eliminating the opportunity gap in their communities.

Classes like English Support at Greenhill High benefit students not only by providing them with the academic tools they need to succeed at a rigorous high school, but by allowing students to feel less alone in their challenges and identities. These classes are distinct from traditional tracked classes in that students enroll in Support concurrently with their college preparatory English class. These classes are designed to give students the resources to make success in high school, and ultimately college, tenable. Alternatively, many tracked classes eliminate the possibility for students to attend college immediately after high school.

However, teachers of Support classes must be cognizant of students' past experiences with school, and of the judgement and self-consciousness students may feel around being in these classes. If teachers are unaware of the lived experiences of their students, they risk exacerbating existing challenges these students face while at school.

This study is limited in several ways. First, this study had a small number of student and teacher participants. If it had been possible to collect more data, this study would have included a larger number of students. The initial plan had been to survey as many of the ninety-nine freshmen across the Academic English classes as possible, but only thirty students ultimately participated. While the students involved represented a variety of racial, ethnic, socio-economic,

and academic backgrounds, the relatively small number likely did not provide as much variety and insight as a larger sample would have offered.

The participants in the anonymous survey also reflected diversity in terms of their outlook on school. Some who participated were academically driven and enrolled in Honors classes other than English. Also involved were students who only participated to get out of class for a few minutes. Yet, these participants were all Academic or Support English students; Honors or AP English students were not a part of this study. This limited the study by not including the voices of students in the highest academic levels who may experience judgement and motivation in different ways at school than students in Academic or low-track classes. These students may also have more academic support at home, which may reduce the impact of student-teacher relationships for these students.

Another limitation of this study is that the only students in the study were freshmen. This study would have benefitted from the perspective of high school students in other grade levels. Without their voices, this study was not able to look at the long-term effects of being in Support English or low-track English classes. Older high school students generally demonstrate more self-reflection and self-awareness, and they may have presented more nuanced interpretations of their experiences.

While the participants in the focus group were diverse in their racial, ethnic, and gender identities, they represented the students in Support English who were generally the most engaged with their education. The students who did not participate were those who were more withdrawn or lacking in motivation. This limited the study by giving too much value to students who had positive relationships with the Support English class overall, as well as the teacher.

Another limitation of this study is that the teacher participants were both white women. If given additional time to collect data, this study would seek out a more diverse group of adults to interview. Despite their experience working in the Support English program, they were unable to speak knowledgeably about the experience of students of color on a predominantly white campus.

This study is also missing the voices of the parents and guardians of participants. Parents and guardians would have been able to offer their perceptions of the Support English program, and the ways in which it succeeds and fails in adequately meeting the needs of its students.

These findings are specific to the research site in a number of ways. First, this site has an English Support program — not all schools do. This program is designed to “catch” students who likely will enroll in low-track classes, and provide them with the tools to prevent that from happening. Second, while the participants were relatively diverse, the school itself is populated by predominantly white, middle-class students and teachers. Students of color at this site may have been conditioned to draw less attention to race than they might have if they had greater representation at school.

Connected to this limitation is how my own bias appeared in this study when I was surprised that my students were less frank about race than I had expected. I had assumed race would feature prominently in their lives, and that they would be eager to talk about it. Instead, a relatively small number of participants acknowledged race, and when they did, they did not dwell on it or go far in depth.

Future researchers might consider exploring strategies for teaching social-emotional learning and metacognition in low-track high school English classes. This knowledge could shed light on how to support students in building practical life skills that will help them inside and out

of the classroom. Researchers interested in Support classes could pursue the ways in which Support classes impact student performance across different disciplines. This research could provide data for schools interested in introducing or expanding this form of academic intervention. If the data suggests Support classes can improve academic achievement across disciplines, schools may be more willing to invest in these classes.

### Conclusion

This research set out to explore how students, particularly students of color, in low-track or similar English classes experience belonging and academic achievement in a predominantly white high school. The research aimed to uncover how students made meaning out of their enrollment in low-level English classes, and how being in these classes shaped their identity as learners. Ample research discussed the numerous ways in which the tracking system harms students in low-track classes by reinforcing racial stereotypes, depleting motivation, and restricting access to meaningful educational experiences (Blaisdell, 2016; Karlson, 2015; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Modica, 2015; Oakes, 1986). Taking this into consideration, the research strove to understand how the role of friendship, particularly same-race friendships, impacted a student's feelings about being in school while enrolled in a low-level English class. The literature examined the widespread impact of friendships on the lives of students, and several researchers presented the idea that same-race friendships can assist students of color in navigating the racial space of high school (Blaisdell, 2016; Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005; Mayer & Tucker, 2010). This presented an unexpected conflict. Brought together, these two bodies of literature present questions about the possibilities of supporting students academically and emotionally in low-track classes by providing them with opportunities to create meaningful relationships with peers within the classroom.

Despite the negative effects of the tracking system, this research discovered that when students are given the opportunity to develop emotionally and academically supportive relationships with their peers and teachers, they develop a greater sense of belonging at school and have a more positive outlook on their education. This feeling of belonging has implications for the classroom, including improving students' motivation and overall investment in their education. However, the findings reveal that for students in Support English, the greatest threat

to their sense of belonging at school was judgement from their peers about their enrollment in Support English. In this study, Support English students were those who were enrolled in a second period of English to improve their skills in their primary college-preparatory English class. Similar to low-track English, Support English students were mostly students of color, and they all struggled academically for a variety of reasons.

For many students, the judgement, or perceived judgement, from peers about the classes they took caused them to withdraw and develop a negative outlook on their education and prospects for their future. However, not all students responded to the threat of judgement in this way. The research showed that while many students battle negative emotions and experiences related to school including peer judgement, the students who possessed a strong sense of their value as students had the greatest success overcoming negativity. The findings also revealed an additional factor that helped students feel more at home at school. When students saw aspects of their identity reflected in their peers and developed identity-affirming relationships, whether that identity was racial or related to shared experiences, they felt like they belonged at school.

This research revealed that students across academic levels believed they were judged by their peers because of the classes they took. This finding was the most pronounced for students in low-track or Support English classes who reported experiencing a threat to their belonging on campus because of this judgement. The findings reveal that, in contrast to the literature, the students of color in Support English did not explicitly identify race as a factor that made them feel excluded from the dominant white culture of their peers. Instead, they referred to their status as “Support students,” connoting a social hierarchy of which they were at the bottom. While race may play a more significant role than they acknowledged in the study, the widespread feeling of judgement about their classes nevertheless had an impact on their understanding of their place at

school and on their identity as learners. The findings revealed that students struggled under the weight of peer judgement, resulting in weakened motivation at school, a diminishing hope for their future, and a flagging sense of their identity as learners.

However, not all students in Support English reported experiencing these negative consequences of peer judgement. While virtually every student reported experiencing judgement, the students who remained less affected by this peer judgement were those who were secure in their identity as learners, and who possessed a clear understanding of their academic goals. They knew who they were and what they wanted, and they were not willing to let the opinions of others get in the way of their academic success.

While the literature explored the emotional and practical value of friendships in supporting student belonging, this research revealed that relationships with teachers were also considerably influential in helping students feel rooted at school (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). Many students who found themselves in Support English had a history of difficulties with school, and many reported struggling with individual teachers in the past. This finding showed that teachers have tremendous influence in making a student feel more connected to school when they take the time to treat students as individuals. Students shared that positive relationships with teachers made students feel more at ease in the classroom and motivated to participate. Students felt better about school when they believed their teachers cared about them.

To support all students — particularly students of color — in low-level classes, schools and teachers need to focus their attention on facilitating healthy relationships with and among students and emphasizing assets over deficits. Students who feel vulnerable to the judgement of their peers is not a new phenomenon; however, teachers can work to create a culture in which



this form of judgement occurs less often and with milder effects. Teachers and administrators can use these findings to develop programs and curriculum designed to support students' social-emotional learning. Inside the classroom, teachers can adopt a strengths-based approach including teaching students about metacognition and goal-setting. Many students report experiencing low self-esteem because of school, and teachers can work to improve a student's self-esteem by guiding them in setting attainable goals for themselves and recognizing their own growth. Additionally, teachers can facilitate conversations with students about multiple forms of intelligence to help promote a supportive and inclusive classroom environment.

In low-track and classes with similar enrollment patterns, teachers must strive to repair the damage of what may be years of academic difficulties. They must show students that they are committed to their success and growth as individuals. These teachers especially must focus on strengths and celebrate victories of all sizes. The findings show that students respond well to positive teacher attention, and teachers should recognize the power they have in shaping a student's experience in school and developing goals in life.

To promote equity on high school campuses, teachers should endeavor to create a classroom environment in which they can form supportive relationships with their students, and in which students can connect with one another. Students become more invested in their education when they feel like their teachers care about them individually, and teachers should use this knowledge to influence their practice. As students work to understand their own identity, having opportunities to see others who look or behave like them helps students feel less alone and more purposeful at school. Even in the quagmire of adolescence, filled with judgement from peers and uncertain futures, students can find solace and encouragement from those who happen to find themselves sharing the same campus.



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