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The (Mis)Education of Black Boys: Exploring the Contributing Factors of Their Accelerated Curricular Course Decision-Making Process

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Abstract

Research suggests that by 2030, high-level credentials will be essential for gainful employment in Florida. Accelerated courses in secondary school can serve as on-ramps to earning those high-level credentials, which are vital to low-income Black boys aspiring to escape poverty and earn a steady wage. Despite initiatives to expand accelerated coursework opportunities in secondary school, disparities remain: Black boys still enroll in fewer accelerated courses than their White peers. This case study engages an ecological approach to examine how Black boys eligible to pursue accelerated coursework navigate school climate and academic identity play in their decision-making process. Past studies have attended to how Black boys' academic identity and on teacher-student interaction are associated with academic performance. Yet, scant research explores how school personnel, parental figures, and students' belief in their ability connect to the decision-making process from the perspective of course-eligible Black boys. The study's findings reveal structural and operational barriers that limit students' perception of access to participating in accelerated courses. Moreover, this case study proposes approaches to bridge three identified access gaps associated with communication, engagement, and academic expectations.

Keywords: *academic identity, coursetaking, school climate, Black boys' schooling, college preparation*

Black boys—specifically those who have experienced higher levels of rejection in school—can experience harmful reductions in their educational purpose (Arslan, 2016). Their academic and social experiences with teachers, school staff, administrators, and parental figures can cut their exploratory journeys short, and subsequently, shape an academic identity that limits their postsecondary plans and career trajectories. It is important to note the intentional usage of the terms “cut,” “shape,” and “limit.” As established by extensive literature on student motivation (e.g., Zimmerman et al., 1992; Johnson, 2014; Coleman & Davis, 2020), a student who perceives himself as holding little to no agency over his academic and career trajectory may limit his desire to expand his academic appetite and select accelerated coursework. This study explores Black boys’ decision-making about advanced high school curriculum, attending to the context of their school and family environments, towards a deeper understanding of why disparities still persist.

The increasing necessity for postsecondary education in securing gainful employment underscores the value of accelerated high school courses as a foundational step towards academic and professional success. Glennie, Lauff, and Ottem (2017) projected those who graduate with a high school diploma without postsecondary training will not likely attain middle-class status because of unemployment, underemployment, or low earnings. Selecting early college or career and technical education coursework while in high school is of particular interest in Florida where state policymakers and economists argue that a standard high school diploma alone is an insufficient credential; between 2021 and 2030, 64% of gainful employment opportunities are predicted to require a high-quality postsecondary credential (Lamback, 2020). Each assertion arrives at a similar conclusion: enrollment in accelerated high school courses acts as an on-ramp for postsecondary degree attainment. However, robust analyses of national data reveal Black boys continue to be underrepresented in advanced coursework in high school (Rodriguez & Hernandez-Hamed, 2020; Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019). These large-scale studies do not explain the mechanisms for how these disparities occur, nor attend specifically to the voices of those too often not accessing these college preparatory opportunities. This study aims to address this, adding to the literature on Black boys’ opportunities for academic achievement and success, grounded in a case study within a Florida high school.

For more than a decade, Clark High School (pseudonym), which enrolled 1400 students and is based in a medium-sized Florida school district, prioritized creating more opportunities for students to participate in accelerated coursework including investing in recruiting highly qualified teachers and partnering with local colleges, universities, and technical schools to offer 10 traditional dual enrollment courses, 10 Advanced Placement courses (AP), and several career and technical education-focused dual enrollment opportunities on its campus.¹ During this period, hundreds of students participated in those accelerated courses; dozens of students earned the requisite scores on the AP exams, “A’s” and “B’s” in dual enrollment classes, and/or industry level certifications; and a few earned both an Associates of Arts (A.A.) degree and their high school diploma upon graduation.

Data from the Florida Department of Education (n.d.) revealed that Black students, who make up 75% of Clark High School’s total population, earned 34% of the school’s acceleration points. White, non-Hispanic students—who make up only 14% of the schools’ students—earned 48% of the acceleration points. While Clark High School administration and its district leaders implement efforts to expand accelerated coursework opportunities for all students, Black boys still earn fewer dual enrollment credits and enroll in fewer AP courses than their White counterparts.

This qualitative case study explored and provided deeper insight into factors that would contribute to Black boys' decisions to not select accelerated courses, despite their eligibility. More specifically, this case study sought to understand and describe the role that identity and school climate play in the students' decisions on what courses to select.

This research study engaged three prominent theoretical concepts to discuss the intersectionality between the psychological and sociological determinants for the course decision-making process for students: Whiting's (2006) Scholar Identity Model (SIM); Rudasill et al.'s (2018) Systems View of School Climate; and Eccles & Wigfield's (2020) Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT). Each theoretical concept ties back to one of the posed research questions. The research questions are as follows:

1. How do Black boys' academic experiences shape their decisions about whether to participate in accelerated coursework?
2. How do Black boys consider and engage with familial influences (off-campus stakeholders) when making the decision on whether to select accelerated course work?
3. How do Black boys consider and engage with their teachers and school counselors (on-campus stakeholders) when making the decision on whether to select accelerated coursework?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framing

Black Boys and Accelerated Secondary School Coursework

Research studies show that students who participate in accelerated curricular opportunities are more likely to enroll in college (Adelman, 1999; Jackson, 2010; Long et al., 2012) and thereby are also more likely to find gainful employment and higher wages in adulthood (e.g., Long, 2010; Perez-Felkner, 2013). However, well-documented racial disparities exist among those who have access to such (generally free) accelerated coursework in high school, even when adjusting for college major, gender, and other important factors that shape which courses students do or do not choose and the effects of accessing these courses (Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019; Irizarry, 2021).

Notably, when adjusting for completion of advanced math/science and computing-related courses in high school, predicting postsecondary degree attainment in such fields following high school acceleration course opportunities, Black boys do as well or better than their White peers (Nix & Perez-Felkner, 2019; Tyson et al, 2007). Accordingly, these opportunities hold real promise, and large-scale studies such as those cited above (from state and national longitudinal databases) show effects but insufficiently explain why these patterns occur, even in the present moment when the benefits of accelerated curriculum has been long understood by researchers and policy makers, if not students, families, and staff at schools who have not historically had high enrollments in accelerated courses.

We turn now to three complementary but typically not combined theories, to attend to Black boys' social contexts for their curricular decision making. We know schools are key sites that shape these decisions, often via information and expectation shared between students and their school peers, their peers' social networks, and school staff (Crosnoe & Schneider, 2010; Klevan et al., 2016; Robinson & Roksa, 2016). Counselors are an especially notable type of staff member for college and career preparation, particularly around coursework, and studies have identified the importance of urban school counselors for Black boys' curricular pathways (Gast, 2021; Hines et

al., 2019).

The theories below engage with and attend to these school relationships. First, we explain research on *scholarly identity*, and why this may be especially useful for understanding how Black boys reason through and make sense of the curricular opportunities in the context of other needs and demands. Next, we attend to a *systems view of school climate*, which allows us to better consider these environments and the actors within them. Finally, we attend to a *situated expectancy-task value* framing, informing the study's approach to how students approach their relationships to specific tasks, courses, and career paths. Each theoretical framework noted in this section works both independently and interdependently as contributing factors to explore the challenges Black boys experience in accessing accelerated coursework.

Scholarly Identity Model

Whiting (2006) developed the idea of Black scholar identity: that, for Black students in particular, how they perceive themselves in relation to their educational environment shapes their identities as students which, in turn, has consequences for their educational attainment. Moreover, their identity as a scholar moves beyond grades and performance and includes the student's feelings toward school, achievement and the decisions that students make. Whiting's (2009) School Identity Model (SIM) included nine (9) components: self-efficacy, future orientation, willingness to make sacrifices, internal locus of control, self-awareness, strong need for achievement, academic self-confidence, race pride, and masculinity. Whiting's SIM extends previous self-efficacy discourse, in that, SIM offers a contextualized account for specific outcomes when the complexity of race is introduced. Bronner (2014) noted that there was a leak in the educational pipeline for Black boys. Repairing the leak begins with identity construction "at a grassroots level to challenge the status quo and advance contemporary and progressive counternarratives that begin with the end in mind" (p. 2). In summary, fostering a positive scholar identity among Black boys and young men is crucial for promoting academic engagement and achievement; notably, identities are shaped by the climates where students are embedded.

Systems View of School Climate

To further understand why eligible Black boys elect not to participate in accelerated courses requires a consideration of the school's environment. Scholar identity is a psychological determinant which can be a contributing factor in Black boys' decision-making. As those boys are funneled through the school environment however, there is potential to shift their course selection decisions. Rudasill et al. (2018) offered the Systems View of School Climate (SVSC) framework that positions "students at the center of a series of nested and interactive contexts that work synergistically to support or detract from students' experiences in school" (p. 36). While the SVSC contains a series of subsystems which play an intricate part in shaping the student's educational experiences, for the purposes of this paper, the authors focused on the nanosystem specifically as a core sphere of influence.

Rudasill and colleagues (2018) explained the nanosystem as a pattern of relationships and interactions experienced by the student during each school day. As Lareau (2015) noted, a small, seemingly insignificant event—from earning a low-test score to receiving help from school staff—can threaten a long-held goal, generate opportunities for more, meaningful engagement, or mark a milestone in a life path. Each of these moments form a student's perspective on education.

Ultimately, a set of expectations for achievement level will begin to drive the decision-making process, such as participation into courses that will advance post-secondary enrollment efforts.

In her three-year case study, Perez-Felkner (2015) examined the perceptions of underrepresented minority high school students using classroom observations, surveys, and in-depth interviews. This study attended to Black and Latino students' educational aspirations, reporting that a meaningful indicator of Black and Latino high school students' expectations for their future reflected their uncertainty in how far they may matriculate in their schooling. Perez-Felkner's (2015) findings illustrated the structural barriers that minoritized students face influences their perception of school climate, as Rudasill and colleagues (2018) define it. While Rudasill et al. (2018) specifically engaged the student-teacher dynamic in the SVSC framework, this research examines the student-teacher relationship as well as school personnel associated with navigating the students' decision-making: the school counselor. A school counselor maintains the student's academic records as they matriculate through the educational system. School counselors have an academically holistic perspective of the student's performance, whereas a teacher has a daily performance perspective. Both perspectives are valuable to this researcher.

Situated Expectancy-Task Theory

Finally, this study turns to Eccles and Wigfield's (2020) Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT) to understand why Black boys who are eligible for accelerated coursework decide not to participate in the program. If academic identity catalyzes a student's decision-making process and school climate shapes their decisions, the SEVT explains both the motivation and outcomes of such decisions. Eccles and Wigfield's (2020) SEVT extends their earlier Expectancy-Value scholarship that relegated the decision-making process to two factors: expectancy and value.

The Situated Expectancy-Value Theory asserts that an individuals' experiences, coupled with the formation and development of their memories, task perceptions, self-concepts, and identities, influence the order of expectancy for success and subject task values across the options being considered (Eccles and Wigfield, 2020). SEVT highlights an idea that a student's expectancy-value attitudes are situationally specific and culturally bound. The authors assert that, for the individuals, the SEVT model occurs over a specific time and is influenced by the immediate situation in which the decision is taking place (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020).

Methodology

Setting and Sample

This multi-method case study was based at Clark High School, where of the more than 1,400 students who were currently enrolled, 62.9% (n=905) received federal benefits (i.e., SNAP and/or TANF) and subsequently were classified as low-income. Among these low-income students, 45.8% (n=416) were Black boys eligible for accelerated curricular programs, defined at the school as those with a cumulative GPA of 2.0 or higher. Among these 416 Black boys, 6% (n=56) were classified as true seniors and met the criteria to participate in the survey. Only 30% of these senior Black boys from economically disadvantaged families (n=17) participated in an accelerated course.

Data Collection

Three methodological approaches were used in this project, to triangulate information to enhance validity. Specifically, we used surveys, individual interviews, and document analysis, discussed further below.

Surveys. The first author visited Clark High School 7 times over a 2-month period. Over that span, using the Qualtrics survey platform, we readministered a 24-question online survey to 26% (15) of the eligible Black boys who were classified as true seniors. The findings of the survey served multiple purposes: to better inform parents, school counselors, and other stakeholders on how students perceive and engage in the course selection decision-making process and to serve as an initial prescreening tool that determined the candidates for the interview portion of the research. Those students who offered the strongest survey opinions stood a greater chance of being selected for the interviews.

Interviews. Individual interviews were facilitated with students, parents, and school personnel. Three boys were selected to participate in the interview portion of the study: one currently enrolled in two accelerated courses, one formerly enrolled in an accelerated course, and one never enrolled in an accelerated course. Each parent was also interviewed: one parent's highest degree attained was a bachelor's degree, one parent earned a high school diploma, and one parent did not complete high school. A total of three parents were interviewed. Five school personnel, one school counselor and four teachers, were also interviewed. Since there was only one school counselor interviewed, to protect the identity of the counselor, we did not reveal the position of any school employee. All Clark High School employees were referenced as "school personnel" only. Moreover, to ensure identities remained anonymous, the lead author replaced each participant's actual name with a pseudonym.

Document Analysis. The lead author analyzed the online guidance document (the course directory), a detailed artifact that lists the available academic and elective courses. The Assistant Principal of Curriculum at Clark developed the online course directory based on faculty expertise and course availability. The course directory is loaded on the school's website and into the student's portal for entering the learning management system made available by the school district.

Data Interpretation. To code and analyze the collected data, research team employed a six-phase thematic analysis process to identify, code, and analyze the data. First, the lead author developed initial codes across the individual interview transcripts and survey responses, building an initial qualitative dataset. Second, in consultation with the second author, a coding matrix was used to identify common key phrases of interest across the data set. Next, phases 3 and 4 attended to the development of themes and their investigation. Creating themes required sorting the various codes. During Phase 3, these same phrases of interest were re-sorted according to emergent themes. Phase 4 involved (a) reviewing the patterns within each code and (b) assessing the validity of individual themes, including ensuring that this theme was supported by sufficient evidence.

Finally, the inductive coding of patterns and themes that emerged from the data was reviewed again with attention to the theoretical frameworks guiding the study. Phase 5 required the lead author to further define and identify the themes and their relationship to the theoretical frameworks: Bandura's academic self-efficacy theory, Rudasill's Systems View of School Climate framework, and/or Eccles and Wigfield's Expectancy-Value theory. Aligning themes to these established theories allowed for further theme refinement and definition. Subsequently, the lead author further honed the coding system towards a hierarchy organized around three major thematic

groupings: communication gaps, engagement gaps, and academic expectations from school personnel.

Analytic Strategy and Triangulation

For the purposes of this study, the researchers explored the circumstances that shape student decision-making by using qualitative research techniques including surveys, interviews, and through analyzing a school-maintained document. Surveys were administered to students as a prescreening tool. A student course directory was used as a source for a document analysis. Interview sessions were conducted and included students, parents (or parental figures), teachers, and school counselors. Using multiple methodological approaches in data collection and data interpretation to facilitate a triangulation strategy allowed for a richer understanding of student decision making. Additionally, the researchers balanced allowed themes to emerge inductively from participant responses as well as deductively in aligning the initial themes to the three guiding theoretical frameworks. Thus, the data triangulation research strategy strengthened the validity and credibility of the findings.

Positionality

It is important to note that the first author's relationships with Clark High School extends beyond his service as one of its former teachers. As the former Associate Dean of Academic Partnerships at the local state college, he was charged with expanding the dual enrollment program in several local secondary schools. During his tenure as the Associate Dean, he helped Clark's administration hire more credentialed instructors to teach dual enrollment courses on its campus. While enhancing dual enrollment course offerings increased subsequent student participation for other student populations, it only *marginally* increased participation among low-income, Black boys. This researcher drew on his relationships with teachers, school counselors, and school administration to recruit and interview students, parents, and school personnel to participate in the study. The second author was also experienced with curricular pathways in secondary and postsecondary urban public school settings, including in the state, district, and locality where this study was based.

Local Context and Definitions of Accelerated Coursework

For the purposes of this study, the researchers defined accelerated curriculum as the State of Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) interpreted them: dual enrollment courses, both traditional and career dual enrollment, as well as Advanced Placement (AP) courses. FLDOE also includes high school career technical education (CTE) courses where students can earn Career and Professional Education (CAPE) industry certifications or CAPE acceleration industry certifications identified on the industry certification funding list, International Baccalaureate (IB), and Cambridge Advanced International Certificate of Education (AICE) courses as accelerated curricular pathway opportunities. However, the researchers only examined AP and dual enrollment courses – both traditional and career dual enrollment.

The local context, Clark High School, does not offer IB or AICE courses. Subsequently, the researchers could not consider those programs within the local context. Furthermore, while Clark's CTE courses offer students an opportunity to develop academic belonging, build student

agency, and acquire high-quality, transferable skills, those courses do not provide on-ramps to postsecondary and career success like dual enrollment or AP courses. This research contextualized the information to further understand the accelerated coursework. It is important to note that career dual enrollment courses, like high school CTE courses, afford students an opportunity to earn industry-level certification. However, unlike CTE courses, career dual enrollment courses award college credit. Subsequently, the researchers included career dual enrollment in the study.

Findings

RQ1: Quantitative Insights from Survey Responses and Site Visits

Table 1 reflects 3 of the 24 questions from the survey that revealed whether the students have had communication about accelerated coursework with on-campus and off-campus influences. In examining the responses of the total participant pool, the survey revealed that students who have had at least one conversation with their parental figures about selecting an AP or dual enrollment course was 1.73 ($\sigma = .44$); an average of 1.60 ($\sigma = .49$) of the student survey participants have had at least one conversation with their teacher(s) about selecting an AP or dual enrollment course. An average of 1.27 ($\sigma = .44$) of the student survey participants had at least one conversation with their school counselor about selecting an AP or dual enrollment course. It is important to note that the higher averages indicate that more students engaged with their on-campus or off-campus influences about selecting an AP or dual enrollment course. In other words, on average, fewer students (average of 1.27) had at least one conversation with their school counselor about selecting AP or dual enrollment courses than with their parent (1.73) or teachers (1.60).

Table 1

Student Communication About Selecting AP or Dual Enrollment Courses

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>	<i>Variance</i>
Have you had at least one conversation with your parents (or parental figures) about selecting AP or dual enrollment courses?	1.73	2.00	0.44	0.20
Have you had at least one conversation with your teacher(s) about selecting AP or dual enrollment courses?	1.60	2.00	0.49	0.24
Have you had at least one conversation with your school counselor about selecting AP or dual enrollment courses?	1.27	1.00	0.44	0.20

Note: All students responded, n=15. The survey items are coded such that 1=Strongly Agree and 6=Strongly Disagree

RQ1 & 3: Qualitative Insights from School Personnel Interview Responses

While school personnel offered varying opinions on many of the characteristics a student would need to possess before recommending an accelerated course, each school personnel interview participant agreed that they are less likely to make a recommendation if the student does not exhibit an exceptional work ethic, tremendous academic drive, and deeper levels of analytical thinking. One school personnel member noted that recommending students who do not demonstrate those specific behaviors would “tear down the student’s confidence.” However, that same participant referenced the teacher-student engagement in an [accelerated course] was “like that scenario of your dream.” Furthermore, that interview participant admitted to prejudging the abilities of student enrolled in general classes: “I do limit myself with my general classes and kind of prejudge [the students].” For these students, the limited engagement opportunities could suppress an appetite to select accelerated coursework. Subsequently, the limiting experiences in these general classes shape an academic identity that stifles creativity and exploration – other criteria interview participants associated with accelerated coursework participation.

RQ2 & 3: Qualitative Insights from Student and Parent Interview Responses

Of the three student interview participants, one student participant was actively taking an accelerated course – two AP courses. One student had never participated in an accelerated course. The third student had participated in an accelerated course but was not enrolled in any of those courses when the research was conducted. That student—who had taken a career dual enrollment course—did not know it was considered an accelerated course as evident in his response to one of the lead researcher’s questions: Are you familiar with traditional dual enrollment and career dual enrollment courses? The interview participant, who earned a welding certificate at Lively Technical College, said “yes sir” when I asked him if he was familiar with the difference between dual enrollment, career dual enrollment and AP courses. However, when asked whether he had ever taken any of those types of courses, he said “no, sir.” The student’s response indicates that there is a disconnect in his understanding of accelerated course types.

Parent and Student Perceived Engagement Level in Course Decision-Making

One of the more insightful findings regarded the level of engagement between the interview respondent and the course selection process itself. During the interview, the lead researcher presented three course selection engagement options: engaged, disengaged, or unengaged. It is important to note that the researcher offered context for disengaged and unengaged. The lead researcher defined a disengaged participant in the course selection process as a participant who felt their agency in the course decision-making process had been taken from them. As an unengaged participant, the respondent felt as if that individual never owned any part of the decision-making process. Interestingly, each of the three student participants mentioned that they felt like they are engaged in the course selection process. However, each parental figure participant stated that they felt disengaged in the course selection process. Another response that each parent figure had in common related to how they found out in which classes their student was enrolled. Each parent respondent indicated that once the student entered their junior year, the student no longer engaged them in the course decision-making process.

Each parental figure said that, according to their student, classes had been selected for them. One parent recounted her son's experience in the course decision making process: "my son said the [school counselor] came into one of their classes and told them to take this class. We asked if 'we could challenge them.'" The parent wanted to insert herself into the process but did not articulate an idea of where to start. The student noted that he was fine with the classes that the school counselor picked. And, just like that, the course decision-making conversation between the student and the parent was over. This statement corroborates two findings: 1) the school personnel's assertion that school personnel are the first point of contact in determining eligibility for participation in accelerated coursework, and 2) the parents' claim that they are disengaged from the course decision-making process. In many cases, the parental figures appear disengaged because they do not understand the dynamics of the accelerated courses offered. The selection process, language and naming conventions of the courses are foreign.

Curricular Planning Resource Availability: Document Analysis

The lead researcher analyzed one of the more important documents when a Clark High School student is making a course-selection decision: an online guidance document called the course directory. Analyzing the course directory served as a triangulation strategy to assist the researchers in developing corroboration among multiple sources of evidence. Clark High School administration offers the course directory as a tool to assist students in selecting courses. In this case study, the course directory tool is discussed as one point of triangulation.

On the school's website, the course directory tab populates each of Clark's on-campus course offerings. The courses on the directory are organized and categorized into six (6) major categories: Core Courses, AP Courses, Special Programs, Dual Enrollment, Non-Core Courses, and ESE Courses. It is important to note that the traditional dual enrollment options are separate from the career dual enrollment options, although both are governed by Florida Statute 1007.271. If the purpose of the course directory aims to familiarize students with curricular options, it is important to understand how the organization of the six clusters and overall composition of the document affect students' perception of the course options.

Moreover, many of the courses within the directory have hyperlinks which route to the Curriculum Planning and Learning Management System (CPALMS) website. This website provides more information about the course including details related to course type, course description, course objectives, course outcomes, and graduation requirement. The additional information found in the hyperlinks offers context for the courses which, in turn, assigns more meaning to each course. However, traditional dual enrollment courses, career dual enrollment courses, and some special program courses do not offer hyperlinks. The lack of additional information about the course may influence students' interpretation of the course offering and dissuade some students from choosing the opportunity.

Findings Summary

We asked school personnel and students about 40 questions between the Qualtrics survey and the interview. Several Qualtrics survey and interview questions were designed to reveal patterns of communication between the school's personnel and the student, as well as the parents and the students. However, the first theme emerged from three specific questions to all student participants:

- Have you had at least one conversation with any school stakeholder about selecting an accelerated course?
- Has your parent, school counselor or teacher engaged the student in at least one conversation about career goals?
- Did your parent take an accelerated course in high school?

The results were consistent. School counselors were (perhaps surprisingly) the least likely to initiate conversations with students about taking accelerated coursework. Fewer teachers engaged students in conversation about career goals, and most of the respondents were unsure if their parents had ever taken an accelerated course while in high school.

Discussion

Analysis of the course handbook document, individual interviews, and survey responses aided in developing a better understanding of the contributing factors that shape known disparities in accelerated course-taking which is typically associated with positive postsecondary academic outcomes, especially for Black and Brown students (Minaya, 2021; Rodriguez & Hernandez-Hamed, 2020; Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019). Moreover, recent research (including in the study site's state of Florida) demonstrates the importance of attending to multiple identities when assessing accelerated college and career secondary school course access, given that enrollments into these courses vary distinctly by students' race, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Nhien et al., 2024). In distinction to some of these large-scale studies that attend to racial and socioeconomic disparities, and the psychologically focused studies described earlier in this manuscript which attend less to inequalities in college preparation, this study was specifically interested in exploring how and why Black boys eligible for accelerated course work might be dissuaded from selecting such courses. From our analysis of the data gathered, three themes emerged as contributing factors: a communication gap, an engagement gap, and lower academic expectations.

The Communication Gap

Eccles and Wigfield (2020) posited that students will only have a small subset of skills and resources from which they are able to draw when enacting the decision-making process. Those students must rely on the skills, experiences and knowledge of those around them to fully explore all available options. With that, the results seemingly illustrate one source in the communication gap, namely the lack of communication about accelerated course options led an inauthentic understanding of the significance of said courses. School personnel have not made the coursework-to-career connection conversation a priority. Additionally, while the parents may want to understand the importance of the accelerated courses, it is more difficult for those with limited or no shared experience with such courses to arm their student with what Lareau (2015) termed the 'cultural capital' needed to navigate the school environment. "Today's choices and performances become tomorrow's past experiences" (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020, p. 3). If the choices are never made and opportunities to perform are never granted, past experiences can never formulate.

The intersection of Whiting's (2006) Scholar Identity Model and Eccles and Wigfield's (2020) Situated Expectancy-Value Theory provides the contextual backdrop for a better

understanding of why discussing career goals, engaging students in conversation on career pathways, and articulating how taking specific courses as an on-ramp for future success is so important. Whiting's (2009) SIM noted that Black boys who do not identify as scholars are without a vision for the future and will seek immediate gratification and set short-term goals. The author asserted that future-oriented students "set realistic goals...they recognize the importance...and the benefits of taking challenging courses (e.g., AP, IB, and honors courses) in order to reach their goals" (p. 225). Considering the consequences of Black boys missing out on opportunities to develop scholar identities through accelerated coursework, Hines et al. (2022) noted the importance of such courses – and of school actors like school counselors who can engage Black male students in taking them – for their longer-term academic and career potential.

Eccles and Wigfield's (2020) SEVT theory indicated that goals and identity are subjected to the specific current situations in which "both conscious and non-conscious decisions" are formulated. Subsequently, the choices that are being considered is limited to prior experience as well as cultural values and characteristics that surround the individual. A student who relies only on his prior experience to make decisions about his future will not have sufficient information on what credentials and courses may be needed to achieve his specific career goals. While these communication gaps may arise in part from competing demands and high student loads at the schools most commonly attended by Black boys (Gast, 2021), our finding that school personnel fail to fully engage in conversations about their futures undergirds a communication gap that can widen as these Black boys move closer to graduating high school.

The Engagement Gap

Evidence from the interviews emerged a second theme – the engagement gap. Each parent noted that they felt unengaged or disengaged from the process that governed the selection of the courses. *Disengaged*, for the purposes of establishing the engagement gap theme, means that parents were once engaged in their child's course selection process, but, over the years, they have been removed from the process. *Unengaged* connotes a parent who, at no time, felt as if they were not ever engaged in the course selection process.

School personnel indicated that, for many of the students, school stakeholders reviewed a student's transcripts, assessed academic and behavioral performances, and made recommendations for accelerated courses based on the information gathered. Moreover, many school personnel revealed that this activity was not a collaborative effort shared by all stakeholders; the tasks were initiated and executed by a limited number of invited participants. It is important to note that the school personnel tasked with reviewing transcripts indicated that they did not have the bandwidth to meet with students and discuss long-term goals – an aspect that drives the decision-making process, according to Eccles and Wigfield (2020).

Furthermore, Bronner (2014) asserted that the P-12 schools should view Black boys not as "damaged goods", but rather as individuals with agency capable of engaging as scholars. Here, Bronner underscores the importance of shared engagement in the course selection process. Whiting (2006) suggested that parents, mentors and other off-campus stakeholders lay the foundation for a Black boy's scholar identity. With that, Bronner (2014) noted the urgency for increased parent engagement and advocacy for Black boys given that they are not participating in accelerated curriculum at the same rate as their White counterparts. When the school's administration relegates the course selection process to school personnel only, Black boys stand a greater chance of being misidentified or miseducated.

Setting the Bar for Academic Expectations

The third theme to emerge from the research concerned the academic expectations set for the students. The data gathered provided information on how the students were included in the curriculum development strategy. In one interview, the school personnel asserted that designing a lesson plan for an AP course was a “dream scenario.” The school personnel discussed the intentional design of the AP course. Conversely, the interviewee stated that she often prejudged the abilities of those students found in the general classes. It is important to note that there are significantly more Black boys in general courses than AP courses at Clark High School. When asked if students can move from general classes to an accelerated course, the participant noted, “I don’t think they can make that leap.” The participant admitted to limiting the engagement with students in general courses. The school employee claimed that students should “use honors classes as steppingstones to those [accelerated curricular] courses.” A student cannot make the leap from general education courses to acceleration courses if the educator does not challenge the student to expand his thinking.

Clark High School employees’ responses support the idea that Black boys are insufficiently challenged or held to high academic expectations. Black boys who enter any academic setting with low educational expectations has little to no confidence in his performance; subsequently, those Black boys are more likely opt out of rigorous coursework. Whiting (2006) would suggest that those students lack self-confidence. Once Black boys engage in the school setting, school personnel play an intricate role in mending the accelerated course enrollment gap for those students. Rudasill and colleagues (2018) asserted that the teacher-student classroom interaction shapes a student’s academic experience and, in turn, contributes to forming his opinion of his academic and career trajectory. Subsequently, positive experiences in the classroom inform the next round of situational decisions, according to Eccles and Wigfield (2020). It is a recurring process that only relents with plausible interventions.

Engaging a conceptual model that considers academic efficacy, parental influences in the form of engagement and advocacy, and the teacher-student engagement that intellectually challenges Black boys will motivate them to select accelerated courses. Each Black boy begins like any other student – under the assumption that he can navigate the system and achieve academic success. As he is funneled through the school system and his confidence in the material and engagement with school personnel grows, his course selection decisions take on a different value system, and his academic identity not only maintains its shape but grows.

Recommendations

The recommendations found in this portion of the manuscript address the emerging themes as articulated in the data findings. It is important to note that the following recommendations only address a small and very specific aspect of an incredibly complex issue: the accelerated course decision-making process for Black boys. It is just as important to acknowledge that the decision-making process for Black boys is one aspect of a much broader, complicated issue – the miseducation of Black boys. One manuscript is incapable of fully addressing such an intricate and involved topic. However, offering recommendations to better support Black boys in their course selection decision process moves the conversation closer to addressing the broader topic.

The lead author engaged with Clark High School’s students, parents, school personnel and

other community stakeholders for over a decade and a half as a teacher, academic partner, community partner, school board member, mentor, and researcher. Over those years, the lead author found that the Clark High School administration has offered its students many opportunities to enroll in accelerated courses. While there are many opportunities for students to select accelerated courses, there are many structural and operational barriers that limit access. It is important to acknowledge that there is a difference between opportunity and access: opportunity denotes availability – the existence of the activity; access reflects the user’s ability to effectively leverage and navigate the opportunity in a way that meets the desired outcome. This study’s recommendations introduce a conversation in how to bridge multiple access gaps found in communication, engagement, and academic expectations.

For this study’s purpose, the recommendations offered are not critiques of the school personnel, the students, nor the parents, nor of their abilities, techniques, or experiences. Rather, the recommendations are intended to build a set of suggestions that would structure positive experiences and, subsequently, lead to more Black boys enrolling in accelerated coursework. Each recommendation represents changes aimed at bridging the communication gaps, the engagement gaps, as well as setting academic expectations.

Communication Gap. To begin to address this communication gap, the Clark High School administration should update its online course guidance directory. In the effort, the administration should include hyperlinks that rout the user to course descriptions and course requirements for all available courses. Currently, the course description and course requirements are only available for some of the general courses, a few of the elective courses and none of the dual enrollment courses. Moreover, courses associated with career dual enrollment should include potential salary expectations, market demand, and career trajectory. The additional information offers context and could assist students in making more informed decisions about the courses they select.

While Clark High School online course guidance directory was the focal point of the communication gap recommendation, poor communication can manifest in various ways across different communities. Specifically, limiting access to information through ineffective dissemination, providing fragmented information to students and parents, and disseminating inconsistent messages can all contribute to a communication gap in other communities. Each of these factors may lead to a lack of awareness among the students and parents regarding the availability of accelerated courses. Ineffectively communicating is as detrimental as no communication at all, as both may yield the similar results – dissuading Black boys from participating in accelerated courses.

Engagement Gap. To address the engagement gap, Clark High School should extend the accelerated course conversation to include parents or caregivers. Hosting a series of parent engagement seminars designed to educate stakeholders on the accelerated course process, its requirements, and future academic and career implications for taking such courses may be needed. Moreover, partnering with neighborhood association leaders and other community advocates to develop “street teams” – teams that canvass neighborhoods and disseminate important information – may be worth exploring.

This research discovered another finding pertinent to the level of engagement in the accelerated course decision-making process. As noted earlier, parents felt disengaged from the process that governed the selection of the courses. To mend the engagement gap, we recommend that the Clark high administration send the updated online course directory and a second document that lists all Clark’s course offerings to parents via email and make it easily available and searchable on their website. After parents are afforded an opportunity to converse with their

student about each of the course offerings, students are better positioned to bring the parents' course recommendations to the school.

Additionally, our research analyses revealed another source of disengagement for parents: the language barrier. Often, educators use education-specific terminology including but not limited to words and acronyms unfamiliar to parents: accelerated courses, CTE, career dual enrollment, and AP. The school district should create a handbook for parents that included a glossary of terms – a translation guide. If parents better understand the terminology and discourse used by school staff, parental engagement may increase.

Limited parental engagement in the course selection process can have far-reaching implications beyond those earlier noted. Urban, overcrowded schools may struggle to engage parents because of high student-to-teacher or guidance counselor-to-teacher ratios, hindering personalized conversations regarding course selection. Structural and operational barriers can widen without parental involvement. Without parent advocates, schools risk creating barriers that limit students' access to the opportunities and resources essential to their success.

Setting the Bar for Academic Expectations. In preparing to bridge communication and engagement gaps, it is important to first examine the data, such as the percentage of eligible Black boys who are not participating in accelerated coursework compared to other student subgroups on campus. School personnel indicated that they were not aware of any district-wide or school-wide efforts to assess the gap in subgroup enrollment nor discern why Black boys are not participating at the same rate as other students. Without a complete and comprehensive look at the enrollment data, it is difficult for school administration to understand the severity of these gaps and to subsequently implement strategies to address them. Second, because teacher selections begin the accelerated course recommendation process, it is imperative that there is a plan of action to ensure that all stakeholders understand the academic and behavioral expectations of accelerated courses.

We propose calibration sessions for teachers and other school personnel to establish clear academic and behavioral expectations for students to succeed in accelerated courses. These sessions may foster understandings among teachers, encourage shared decision-making and buy-in for program offerings, and standardize school personnel's values around these programs. By aligning expectations via such calibration sessions, educators can better evaluate their own beliefs and make more informed and consistent decisions about student readiness for accelerated coursework and how to enhance readiness among the school's students. Moreover, integrating accelerated coursework elements into general education courses can build capacity for students and teachers, and can allow for earlier formative evaluation of students' readiness, facilitating more inclusive and informed recommendations based on student progress and growth in response to the material rather than over-focusing on end of year grades that average their general education coursework.

Lowered expectations can lead to systemic inequities including academic tracking and placement, as well as lowering the educator's expectations affecting the quality of their instruction and engagement, limits the students' academic potential. Addressing these expectations requires an intentional commitment to fostering high standards for all students and recognizing the diverse capabilities of all students.

Conclusion

To examine the gap in research that seeks to understand how school climate is associated with the academic identity of course-eligible, Black boys which, subsequently, guides their

decision-making process, this study generated a conclusion that we had not considered when we initially proposed this topic. While we recognize that Clark High School offered more on-campus accelerated courses, specifically in the form of dual enrollment courses, than any other high school in the district, it was not apparent that all students did not have access to those courses. Opportunity and access are two different concepts. It is important to understand that access does not always equate to the proximity of the opportunity. The opportunity for students to engage in accelerated coursework is present. However, access to the course (i.e., information on understanding what the course is, demonstrating an interest in the course option, and enrolling in the course) had not been made available to all students.

The missed opportunities to enroll Black boys in these courses cannot be addressed until the communication gap is mended. These course options must be communicated early and often – not just during an 11th grade classroom visit, as one student interviewee described. After the communication gap is addressed, there must be an effort to close the engagement gap; a better effort to actively invite parents and students into the decision-making process provides parents and students access to the courses, not just opportunity for participation. While addressing the engagement gap, it is imperative that Clark High School takes a holistic look at the demographic representation of all its accelerated curricular programs and address the disparity. Subsequently, when Black male students are supported by high expectations from their educational and familial support system, they will be better positioned to develop and embody a Black scholar identity and, in turn, choose courses that reflect their career goals.

Notes

¹ To ensure the anonymity of the local context, this report will replace the name of the school with the pseudonym “Clark High School.”

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