



How do I Get In? Criteria Shaping the High School Course Recommendation Process

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Academic tracking is a common practice in American high schools. While its impact on the lives of teachers and students is well documented, few studies pay close attention to the criteria used to determine high school students' academic trajectories or how teachers select and apply these criteria. This review, which examines the types of criteria guiding high school teachers' course recommendation decisions, is organized into four parts. First, the literature search process is described and the terms tracking and ability grouping are defined. Second, the significance of course placement is addressed through an examination of the relationship between tracking and the opportunity gap. Third, research drawing attention to the meritocratic and non-meritocratic criteria guiding secondary teachers' course recommendation decisions is examined. The review concludes by offering recommendations for making school-based course placement policies and the criteria driving teachers' decisions more consistent and transparent.

Keywords: ability; grouping; tracking; decision-making; teachers; K-12; school; course-taking; recommendations; course-placement

Tracking students according to academic capability is a common practice in American schools. Although its impact on both teachers and students has been widely documented (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Gamoran, 1992; Gamoran & Brends, 1987; Hallam & Ireson, 2001; Kelly, 2007; Oakes, 1985; Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992; Rosenbaum, 1976; Wantanabe, 2006), few studies pay specific attention to the criteria used to determine high school students' academic trajectories. To date, a majority of the research on tracking and ability grouping has focused on its impact in four areas: student achievement, socioeconomic and racial segregation, differences in classroom practices, and affective outcomes. Little of this research explicitly (or deeply) examines the criteria influencing teachers' course placement recommendations or how these criteria are selected and applied. Developing a more informed understanding of these dynamics is important for three of reasons.

First, numerous researchers have found course enrollment in the years surrounding the transition into high school plays a critical role in determining students' academic pathways (see Darling-Hammond, 1995; Lucas, 1999; Mickelson & Everett, 2008; Oakes, 2005). In fact, Kelly (2008) found students enrolled in low-track classes early in high school tend to still be taking low-track classes at the end of high school. Learning more about factors shaping the course placement process will certainly help to illuminate the practices helping to maintain this consequential academic pattern. Additionally, this understanding may provide valuable guidance to practitioners working to identify and more effectively change school-based academic tracking practices.

Second, enrollment in a rigorous academic curriculum is a significant predictor of college readiness and enrollment (Adelman, 1999; Choy et al., 2000; King, 1996). The sheer existence of this relationship suggests

there is a need to better understand the process used to assign students to classes. Additionally, the empirical link between course-taking and future educational outcomes becomes even more significant when considered within the context of research documenting low-income students' traditional underrepresentation in high-track classes considered part of a college preparation course of study (Kelly, 2008; Oakes, 2005) and four-year colleges (NCES, 2010).

Finally, public school districts throughout the United States are embracing de-tracking strategies advocated by education reformers like Jeannie Oakes (2005) and Carol Burris and Delia Garrity (2008). As a result, many middle and high schools have begun to implement open course enrollment policies to increase opportunities for students to experience International Baccalaureate (IB) and Advanced Placement (AP) classes. However, even with the establishment of initiatives to increase student enrollment in high-track classes, much more needs to be understood about criteria being used by teachers to recommend student placement in order to more effectively move this vision forward.

The following review of literature is organized into four distinct, but interrelated parts. First, the literature search process is described and the terms *tracking* and *ability grouping* are defined for use in this review. Second, a discussion of the relationship between tracking and "the opportunity gap" provides context for why more attention needs to be focused on the criteria influencing how high school students are assigned to classes (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 28). Third, research drawing attention to the meritocratic and non-meritocratic criteria guiding teachers' course recommendation decisions is examined. Findings from this analysis, which are purposely integrated within the discussion of literature, reveal the process for selecting and applying criteria is complex, context-specific, and has a tendency to be inconsistent and not clearly documented. The review concludes by discussing the significance of findings and offering recommendations for making school-based course placement policies and the criteria driving teachers' decisions more consistent and transparent.

The Literature Search Process

Two systematic strategies were used to search for relevant literature and to make certain that the maximum extent of relevant research was considered. First, eight resources, spanning the course of 25 years, were analyzed to identify relevant research. These publications include *Keeping Track* (Oakes, 1985/2005), *Crossing Tracks* (Wheelock, 1993), *Tracking Inequality* (Lucas, 1999), *Ability Grouping in Education* (Hallam & Ireson, 2001), *Social Class and Tracking within Schools* (Kelly, 2008), *Neotacking in North Carolina* (Mickelson & Everett, 2008), and *The Flat World and Education* (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Additionally, Oakes,

Gamoran, and Paige's (1992) extensive review of curriculum differentiation was carefully examined. Second, a series of searches within several electronic databases including EBSCOhost, ERIC, JSTOR, PsychInfo, Google Scholar, and ProQuest digital dissertations were conducted. Various combinations of the following terms were used to identify empirical and theoretical literature: *tracking*, *ability grouping*, *course placement*, *criteria*, *teacher decision-making*, *policies*, *teacher beliefs*, *Advanced Placement (AP)*, and *honors classes*. This search yielded over 150 articles; the titles, abstracts, and authors were reviewed to determine both relevancy and accessibility.

Seventy articles were identified in this initial review, of which the introductions, theoretical/conceptual frameworks, research design, and findings sections were considered to identify germane publications. This analysis narrowed the field to a group of 40 articles. Research included in this review was selected because it focused on one or more of the following: school differences in course placement practices; the demographics of track placement; the dynamics shaping tracking decisions; course taking patterns; the implementation of tracking policies; factors influencing how teachers make decisions; teacher involvement in tracking; teacher beliefs about tracking, student ability, or student achievement.

This search was limited to English-language peer-reviewed journals. No date restrictions were used and although academic grouping is prevalent in grades K-5, only studies at the secondary level were considered. Although the majority of research included in this review was conducted in the United States, Hallam and Ireson's (2001, 2003, 2008) recent work on ability grouping in British secondary schools was included. Additionally, secondary analyses were omitted if they did not utilize longitudinal survey data such as the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) or the High School and Beyond study (HSB). Theoretical literature was included if it informed the researcher's understanding of the constructs under investigation.

Study quality was addressed by evaluating both quantitative and qualitative studies to determine the presence of a clear research question(s), whether research design was discussed in a substantive manner, if the study provided clear information about data collection procedures and sample selection, and the alignment between the data, findings, and conclusions used. Study quality was also judged by drawing on two different appraisal frameworks in an effort to increase analytic consistency when drawing conclusions about which study to include in the review. Although the researcher acknowledges decision-making can never be completely divorced from one's subjectivity, every effort was made to ensure the review process was both criterion-based and comprehensive. Qualitative studies were reviewed using criteria articulated by Lincoln (1995); these include:

relationality, positionality, community, voice, critical subjectivity, reciprocity, and sacredness. Quantitative studies were judged by the principles put forth by Fink (2005); these include design, sampling, internal and external validity, and data collection.

Review of Literature

Defining Tracking and Ability Grouping

Prior to 1970, tracking took the form of students being placed into overarching academic programs specifically designed to prepare students for career opportunities or entry into post-secondary education. However, as the civil rights movement began to influence education policy, highly institutionalized, rigidly defined comprehensive tracking programs were gradually replaced by more flexible, less standardized subject-specific pathways through school (Lucas, 1999). Today, this practice continues in nearly all middle and high schools (Hallinan & Kubitschek, 1999; Lucas, 1999; Oakes, Gamoran, & Paige, 1992). This shift, which Lucas (1999) refers to as the “unremarked revolution” because it was never fully documented in the literature, delineates a major transformation in the nature of academic grouping.

As a result, the terms *tracking* and *ability grouping* are often discussed and defined inconsistently within the literature (Hallinan & Kubitschek, 1999). For example, while Good and Brophy (2008) and Oakes (1987) make a clear distinction between tracking and ability grouping, Lucas (1999) and Loveless (1999) rely primarily on the term tracking to discuss any assignment of students to different curricular pathways. Mickelson and Everett (2008), however, developed the term *neotracking* to explain the combination of “older versions of rigid, comprehensive tracking with the newer, more flexible within-subject area curricular differentiation” (p. 536). Additionally, numerous researchers do not identify the difference between tracking and ability grouping.

Although it is acknowledged that tracking and ability grouping are traditionally separated in terms of form and function, similar assumptions shape both practices. Deever (1995) suggests, “when we differentiate between tracking and ability grouping, we are merely talking about different ends of the same horse” (p. 87). Hence, for the purpose of this review, tracking and ability grouping are used interchangeably to refer to any practice of sorting students into classes for instructional purposes.

Why Are We Still Talking about Tracking?

The Opportunity Gap. When teachers recommend students for academic classes, they are making a decision that has the potential to influence students’ high school academic trajectories (Kelly, 2008), college readiness and enrollment (Adelman, 1999; Choy et al., 2000; King, 1996), and future employment and income (Rose & Betts, 2004; Spring, 2009). Because low-income students tend to populate low-track classes (Kelly, 2008; Oakes, 2005) and enroll in college at lower rates than their more economically advantaged peers (NCES,

2010), it can be argued the course placement process has, over time, expanded the “opportunity gap” present in many secondary schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010). This gap, which Darling-Hammond describes as “the accumulated differences in access to key educational resources—expert teachers, personalized attention, high-quality curriculum opportunities, good educational materials, and plentiful information resources—that support learning at home and school,” is one well-documented outcome of curricular tracking and deserves additional consideration within the context of the course placement process (p. 28).

Oakes’ (1992) theory of tracking, which details its technical, political, and normative dimensions and informed the development and organization of this review, provides a practical context to consider the intimate relationship between the opportunity gap and academic grouping. This connection is examined through a close analysis of the educational environment created by ability grouping, the students this practice traditionally disadvantages, and the assumptions supporting its maintenance. Three specific areas of research are addressed: the stratification present in American public high schools (*technical dimension of tracking*); low-income students’ limited access to a high-quality, rigorous course of study (*political dimension of tracking*); and the lack of evidence supporting the widespread use of tracking at the secondary level (*normative dimension of tracking*).

Academic stratification. The technical dimension of tracking can be described as both the process and criteria used to separate students into classes according to academic capability. This academic differentiation, Oakes (1992) argues, “continues throughout the grades through variations in the curricular content, pace, quantity, culminating in distinct college-preparatory and non-college preparatory programs and finer distinctions among levels within the two” (p. 12). Two outcomes related to the technical dimension of tracking deserve attention.

First, many high schools in the United States have explicit policies and organizational structures which dictate the assignment of students to different curricular tracks for instructional purposes. While few would argue this point, Darling-Hammond (2010) suggests these differing academic pathways result in the rationing of high-quality education. Oakes (1987) argues students experience school differently because established curricular paths “form a hierarchy in schools with the most academic or advanced track seen as the top” (p. 4). Writing about stratification in schools, Apple (2004) argues schools serve as mechanisms to distribute select knowledge and cultural resources to certain students in order to separate them from others. Consequently, as students progress through school they are not only provided with different sets of experiences and varying

degrees of institutional access, but are also situated into an academic hierarchy which influences educational outcomes and disadvantages students placed in low-track classes. While this sorting process certainly differs school to school, tracking is entrenched within school culture, which makes it difficult to challenge or alter (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Oakes, Gamoran, & Paige, 1992) and “continues to be one of the most common sources of race and class stratification of opportunities to learn in American schools” (Mickelson & Everett 2008, p. 536).

Second, it is difficult for students, especially after 9th grade, to move from a low-track class to a high-track class. Rosenbaum (1976) found opportunities for movement from low-track classes to high-track classes during high school are often limited; upward mobility was practically non-existent. Although subsequent research has found more curricular movement among students, the lack of mobility identified over 25 years ago still exists in many schools. Oakes (2005) reported 8th and 9th grade course placements “launch students onto academic trajectories that most of them follow throughout high school” (Mickelson & Everett, 2008, p. 544). Both Darling-Hammond (1995) and Lucas (1999) confirm after the first two years of high school, opportunities for movement into high-track classes are limited.

Additionally, only a small proportion of students enrolled in low-track classes transition into college preparatory classes during high school and remain enrolled (Kelly, 2008). Consequently, students entering high school in low-track classes are likely to also finish in low-track classes. Because these initial assignments set a ceiling on how far students can progress it is important to not only take note of the various levels of differentiation with a particular discipline, but to also pay close attention to its position within the curricular hierarchy (Oakes, Gamoran, & Paige, 1992). Considered together, this research illuminates the importance of understanding the role of teachers in shaping students’ academic pathways and the process teachers use to assign students to academic classes during the first two years of high school.

Curricular access and academic attainment.

Numerous researchers have identified the academic differences encountered by students enrolled in different curricular tracks and how this pattern disadvantages certain students while privileging others (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kelly, 2008; Oakes, 2005; Oakes, Gamoran, & Paige, 1992; Wheelock, 1992). To better understand how this disparity is maintained, it is useful to consider the political dimensions of tracking, or those policies and organizational dynamics shaping teachers’ course recommendation decisions. The following discussion situates the importance of paying close attention to how these factors influence both academic attainment and curricular access among low-income students.

Despite significant gains over the past 30 years,

college participation rates among low-income students still lag well behind their middle- and upper-class peers. In almost every year between 1972 and 2008, the immediate college enrollment rates of students from low-income families trailed the rates of those from high-income families by at least 20 percentage points (NCES, 2010). Among the percentage of high school completers in 2008 who were enrolled in two- or four-year colleges the October immediately following high school completion, 81% were from families in the highest income group, 63% from middle-income families, and for those in the lowest income group the rate is below 52% (NCES, 2010). Additionally, for students growing up in low-income families, fewer than 9% of these students earn a bachelor’s degree by age 24 (Haycock, 2006). This data supports Natriello, McDill, and Pallas’ (1990) assertion that “the sorting of students in elementary and secondary school into ability groups and curricular tracks [is] a mechanism that can perpetuate or exacerbate education disadvantages” (p. 15).

Numerous researchers have documented the close relationship between enrollment in high-track classes and college readiness and attendance. Many low-income students face multiple challenges that make it difficult to adequately prepare for and gain access to college. These factors include, but are not limited to, an inability to secure financial aid, a lack of support in the application process, and insufficient academic preparation. Conducting research for the United States Department of Education, Adelman (1999) found academic preparation is the most significant predictor of college success, and enrollment in a rigorous curriculum in high school prepares students with the knowledge, skills, experiences, and academic mindset institutions of higher education expect. Similarly, studies conducted by both King (1996) and Choy et al. (2001) identified enrollment in advanced classes improved the likelihood of enrolling in additional higher-level classes and attending college.

Unfortunately, low-income students are traditionally underrepresented in classes considered part of a college preparation course of study (Oakes, 2005; Oakes & Lipton, 1992; Oakes, Gamoran, & Paige, 1992) and are less likely to be programmed into a rigorous college preparation sequence (Haycock, 2006). Other researchers have also found low-income students disproportionately represented in low-track classes (Darling-Hammond, 2010, Kelly, 2008; Lucas, 1999, Mickelson & Everett, 2008; Oakes, 1990, 2005; Oakes, Gamoran, & Paige, 1992). Writing about this dilemma, Wheelock (1993) posits:

In many districts course enrollment patterns inside individual schools replicate this pattern—with poor, African-American, Latino, and students who are recent immigrants largely absent from course that offer access to the

higher-level knowledge needed for education success and broadened life opportunities. (p. 9)

Summarizing the consequences of these patterns Mickelson and Heath (1999) conclude, "Tracking creates a discriminatory cycle of restricted educational opportunities for minorities that leads to diminished school achievement that exacerbates racial/ethnic and social class differences in minority and majority school outcomes" (p. 570). Over the last 25 years a large body of sociological and educational research has drawn attention to the inequities associated with course enrollment patterns. Low-income students, however, are still highly underrepresented in classes considered part of a high-quality, rigorous academic curriculum.

The myth underlying tracking. The final goal of this introductory discussion is to briefly examine the widely-held belief regarding the academic benefits of tracking. This dynamic, identified as the normative dimension of tracking, encompasses the beliefs, assumptions, and perceived truths supporting curricular tracking. Although tracking remains deeply rooted in a majority of American schools, empirical research does not support its widespread use. For example, Slavin's (1990) analysis of ability grouping at the secondary level found few advantages for students in tracked classes over those of comparable ability in non-tracked classes. Even though the studies included in Slavin's review were conducted prior to 1970, its continual citation by important scholars suggests his findings have both merit and relevance. Lindle's (1994) review of more than 500 articles on tracking and ability grouping revealed similar results. She writes,

the literature clearly shows the inadequacy of ability grouping/tracking as an obsolete practice based on antiquated notions of intelligence, learning, and the structure of knowledge....More than 70 years of research on ability grouping/tracking has failed to establish any obvious benefits for any group of students, except the highest groups. (p. iii)

Although Gamoran and Mare (1989) also found that academically advanced students benefit from tracking, Oakes (1992) argues these advantages are associated with access to enhanced academic opportunities and high-quality teachers rather than a result of homogenous grouping.

In addition to the lack of data supporting tracking, numerous academic and policy organizations have called for an end to this practice. The National Association of School Psychologists (2005), the National Council for the Social Studies (1992), and the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform (2001) have each published policy statements supporting the use of heterogeneous grouping. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund, the ACLU, and the Children's Defense Fund all suggest tracking is a second-generation segregation issue

(Oakes, 1992). Likewise, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, the National Governors' Association, the College Board, and the National Education Association have also recommended schools abandon traditional tracking practices (Wheelock, 1993). Even in the face of well-documented empirical evidence demonstrating the ineffectiveness of ability grouping and condemnation from prominent academic and political organizations, this practice remains deeply entrenched in the majority of secondary schools.

Course Assignment Criteria

Three themes specifically related to course assignment criteria emerged from the review of literature: major theoretical perspectives situating meritocratic and non-meritocratic criteria; the importance of understanding the environment in which these criteria are applied; and the myth of meritorious criteria. These themes, which shed light on the technical dimensions of tracking, are directly linked to the dynamics shaping how teachers recommend students for academic classes.

Theoretical Perspectives. Two theories consistently appear in the literature on tracking. These theoretical orientations offer important insights about the process of sorting students into academic classes. Human capital theorists argue that tracked schools are aimed at preparing students for positions in the workplace, provide fair competition for academic advancement, and allocate students into curricular positions based on "objective assessments of relevant abilities, effort, and interest" (Oakes & Gupton, 1995, p. 5). This interpretation brings social and cultural institutions such as the school and family into the realm of economic analysis (Bowles & Gintis, 1975). Within the context of tracking, this perspective suggests students who are motivated, determined, and ambitious can use schooling to increase knowledge and skills, improve status, and directly benefit from labor. Oakes (1985) points out when individual advancement is not achieved explanations often include a "lack of individual motivation, cultural deficiencies, or genetic handicaps" (p. 199).

Conversely, critical theorists such as Apple (2004) and Bowles and Gintis (2011) conceptualize tracking as a sorting mechanism that reproduces societal patterns of race and class stratification. From this perspective schools are understood as institutions that legitimate and distribute certain knowledge. In contrast to human capital theory, which suggests fair meritocratic competition determines academic mobility, reproduction theory maintains schools are constructed around hierarchies of power that disadvantage historically marginalized identities and provide significant benefits for those children in positions of advantage. These advantages can be understood as one's access to culturally valued resources, knowledge, and experiences that confer status, power, and have "specific laws of accumulation, exchange, and exercise" (Swartz, 1997, p. 8). While

research incorporating these two theoretical perspectives often differs in its purpose, findings, and conclusions, both orientations acknowledge that academic mobility, culturally valued resources, and high status knowledge are unequally distributed among members within society and those with access are in positions of social, political, and economic advantage.

Meritocratic and Non-Meritocratic Placement Criteria. Every year teachers are tasked with the responsibility of recommending students for academic classes. Oakes, Gamoran, and Paige (1992) argue this practice traditionally relies on the selection and application of a combination of meritocratic and non-meritocratic criteria. Additionally, it is not uncommon for schools, academic departments, and even individual teachers within these departments to rely on different placement criteria (Kelly, 2007).

Meritocratic criteria traditionally refer to rigid and objective determinants of ability and intelligence like standardized test scores, grades, and prior course placement. A reliance on these measures of ability is intended to remove teacher-centered conceptions of aptitude and emphasize standardized achievement as the central element guiding recommendations. Non-meritocratic criteria, on the other hand, tends to rely more on demographic characteristics such as race, ethnicity, and social class, and other factors like student choice, parental preference, and teacher recommendations. Teacher recommendations frequently take into account a variety of considerations such as an individual's academic potential, prior academic performances, behavior, motivation, personal interests, attitude, and/or family background.

While some researchers suggest course placement is based solely on meritorious criteria such as academic attainment (Archbald, Glutting, & Qian, 2009) and/or prior course placement (Hallinan, 1992), other studies conclude the opposite, emphasizing race, class, and subjective conceptions of ability influence student assignments (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kelly, 2008; Oakes, 1995). Because the literature supports each of these arguments, there is a need to consider the possibility that meritocratic and non-meritocratic criteria cannot be, to use Oakes' (1987) language, "disentangled" from one another (p. 10). Oakes, Ormseth, Bell, and Camp's (1990) research sheds light on this assertion. In their investigation of 6,000 elementary and secondary math and science teachers they found "assessments of academic ability, placement in different tracks or ability-grouped classes, and the reduced educational opportunities that characterize low-track classes often parallel race and social class differences" (Oakes et al., 1990, p. 8). Research suggests once students get to high school, the race and class-based stratification associated with course-taking patterns has already taken root and recommendations can no longer be seen as purely

meritorious.

School Context. Researching school differences in tracking structures and track assignments, Hallinan (1991) noted, "the constellation of factors used [to place students] and the importance attached to each reflect the assignment policy employed in a particular setting" (p. 245). Kelly's (2007) research on course assignment policies in 92 North Carolina public schools found a diversity of placement criteria being used. Course recommendations, he writes, rely on a "host of requirements, both objective and subjective," and "implementation occurs at both the school and classroom level" (Kelly, 2007, p. 28).

Similarly, using mixed methods to research students' assignment to honors English classes in the transition from middle to high school, Gamoran (1992) reports a variety of meritocratic and non-meritocratic criteria influence the course placement process. While Halinan's (1991) research suggests characteristics of the student body may affect the criteria used to make recommendations, Spade, Columba, and Vanfossen's (1997) examination of the placement procedures in six high schools suggests in schools higher in social class, the process of student placement in math and science was more systematic and included broader assessments of student ability. Although these findings are drawn from small samples, they emphasize the importance of investigating school context, teachers' specific course placement practices, and how they differ in the weight they attach to recommendation criteria. Two particular findings from Kilgore's (1991) research, which drew on data from the High School and Beyond longitudinal study to examine tracking patterns in secondary schools, support this assertion.

First, Kilgore's (1991) findings point out assignment criteria often create a continuum of placement practices ranging from highly restrictive to less restrictive. While highly restrictive practices include quota systems, rigid scheduling, and standardized tests, less restrictive approaches avoid test placements, allow overrides after course assignment, encourage "catching up" in the summer, and convey an overall less-elitist philosophy. Second, organizational exigencies, such as school and teacher expectations for students, number of track options within a discipline, student involvement in selecting courses, and the range of placement criteria being used need to be investigated to better understand how teachers recommend students for classes.

The Myth of Meritorious Measures of Ability. While there is little consensus in the literature regarding which student characteristics or criteria consistently contribute to course placement, there is evidence suggesting teachers commonly rely on non-meritocratic criteria when making course recommendations. For example, researching the course enrollment processes in three comprehensive high schools located, Oakes and

Guiton (1995) found recommendation criteria relied on conceptions of intelligence and motivation as fixed, beliefs that schools should accommodate ability rather than alter academic trajectories, and perceptions of students' suitability for curricular tracks based on "race, ethnicity, and social class" (p. 17). These findings, drawn from teacher interviews and observations and an analysis of student handbooks, course descriptions, and master schedules, are especially significant when considered in the context of research documenting the disproportionate presence of low-income and minority children in low-track classes.

While numerous studies demonstrate track placement, grades, and test scores are common determinants of course placement, student assignments are often colored by other non-meritocratic judgments (Kelly, 2008; Oakes & Guiton, 1995). In a study of student access and achievement in mathematics and science, Oakes, Joseph, and Muir (2004) found in addition to meritocratic criteria, educators frequently relied on "highly subjective judgments about students' personalities, behavior, and motivation" (p. 79). Echoing this finding, Cesario's (2006) qualitative study of 13 secondary math teachers revealed certain groups of students are consistently disadvantaged because many schools do not have clearly established criteria for placing students in ability groups. In a review of 92 high school curriculum guides, Kelly (2007) noted that while criteria for placing students into honors classes may appear meritocratic, it was actually highly subjective because teachers were not provided with strategies to objectively measure academic motivation, independent thinking, oral communication skills, and composition skills. The presence of vague placement criteria forces teachers to develop individual strategies for applying criteria. Emphasizing this problem, Mickelson (2001) writes:

Assignment to tracks is based formally on multiple meritocratic criteria and choices by students and their families. In practice, however, nonmeritocratic factors influence track placement informally as well...Consequently, the tracking process is typically far from meritocratic. (p. 221)

Watanabe (2007) found all six urban teachers participating in her qualitative case study defined what the term tracking meant and how it was implemented differently. This lack of understanding highlights another problem associated with the selection and application of course placement criteria. If teachers, especially those who teach the same subject, do not understand their colleagues' beliefs and understandings about tracking or the criteria they use to make recommendations, developing fair and consistent course placement policies is difficult.

Additionally, teachers often make recommendations without sufficient information about

available school resources or students' academic needs and potential, personal interests, or desires (Riehl, Natriello, & Aaron, 1992). While Kilgore (1991) suggests teachers have a distinct advantage in access to students' standardized test scores, past performance, interests, and aspirations, Lortie (1975) and Ingersoll (2006) note the isolation of classroom teachers from teaching colleagues, counselors, and school-based policy makers. Hallinan (1991) found teachers often place students in classes without in-depth information about their prior tracking history. Consequently, teachers often make course placement decisions in isolation of one another and with limited knowledge about students' academic history. As a result, these decisions frequently rely on a mix of student characteristics and incomplete academic records, and rarely incorporate student interests, personal initiative, or potential.

Ability grouping, which restricts certain students' opportunities to learn, continues even in the face of tremendous opposition and a lack of empirical support. A more informed understanding of the criteria teachers utilize to make recommendations, how they are applied, and why particular measures, whether meritorious or non-meritorious, are selected provides important understandings about why this practice still exists and how it functions within schools.

Conclusions

Three themes, which emerged from the review of literature, deserve additional consideration. First, even though there may not be consensus in the research about the various ways teacher implicitly and explicitly assess and evaluate students when making course recommendation decisions, they are in fact constantly making judgments about characteristics such as academic ability, aptitude, achievement, and motivation. It is important to note that these judgments are not value-free and should not be treated that way. Hence, it is important that teachers, administrators, and parents pay closer attention to the relationship between the meritocratic and non-meritocratic criteria being used to make course placement decisions and how it is being decided, defined, and applied throughout a school. It is, however, important to also keep in mind is that often, this relationship is not clear, cannot be easily mapped, and as demonstrated throughout this review, is shaped by an array of dynamics.

Second, in addition to illuminating the variation in which students are sorted and placed into academic classes, research focused on tracking also suggests teachers need to play a more central role in facilitating changes in how this process unfolds. Watanabe (2007), for example, demonstrates the need for and importance of teachers engaging in meaningful conversations about the meaning, purpose, and implications of tracking, the criteria being used to impact course placement, and the role of teachers in influencing students' academic

trajectories. Although course placement criteria is not a topic commonly discussed in school and department meetings, teachers need to be encouraged to not only consider the criteria they (and their academic department) use to recommend students for classes, but to also reflect on how and why certain criteria are selected. Although these conversations will not likely erase the presence of ability grouping in schools, they may in fact lead to new understandings about how course placement criteria advantages and disadvantages certain students, restricts entry into higher-track classes, and limits certain students' opportunities to adequately prepare for higher education. Encouraging teachers to reflect on their experiences, decisions, and actions has the potential to shift their beliefs and teaching practices (Richardson, 1996).

Third, because tracking is such a pervasive practice in American schools, it can be argued that those individuals tasked with providing professional development to teachers need to pay closer attention to the political, technical, and normative implications associated with this practice (Oakes, 1992). Providing both novice and experienced teachers with meaningful opportunities to critically examine the relationship between and among academic grouping, the opportunity gap, and the purpose of schooling not only stresses the significance of these issues, but it also challenges teachers to begin exploring their beliefs about teaching and learning and consider how these might emerge in the classroom. Exposing teachers to the various dimensions of tracking will make it more likely these issues become a part of their curricular and instructional conversations once they move into the classroom. Although the potential impact of this work can only be imagined, many of the issues addressed in this literature review are absent from the conversations common in many public schools. With these concerns in mind, a number of final recommendations for high school administrators, department chairs, and teachers to consider are discussed below.

Recommendations for Further Action

Communication of course placement policies and criteria.

It is clear from the literature that course placement is contingent on context. While this process often differs from district to district and school to school, it can also vary across academic departments within individual schools. As a result, there seems to be a tremendous amount of inconsistency as it relates to both the academic placement process and the types of criteria informing teachers' course recommendation decisions. As a way to begin addressing these issues, three strategies need to be thoughtfully considered. First, school leaders must facilitate opportunities for school personnel to discuss the school's current course placement practices. These interactions will provide a forum for sharing ideas about how to ensure the course placement process is more

consistent and transparent. Second, consensus needs to be reached about whether policies related to course placement should be developed and implemented within each individual department or at the school-level. Once this is clarified, specific decisions need to be made about four specific issues: the timeline and process for making recommendation decisions, the types of recommendation criteria that should be considered, how information about courses is disseminated to students, and the roles and responsibilities of both teachers and counselors. Finally, course placement policies and criteria need to be made public so that school personnel, parents, students, and other community members have a clear understanding about how students are recommended for and placed in classes. Additionally, information about this process needs to be distributed to parents and students and included in handbooks given to teachers, course catalogs, and on the school's website.

Clear articulation of academic expectations.

When making decisions about the types of criteria informing recommendation decisions, teachers need to have frank discussions about the academic expectations associated with each track within a subject area. For example, there needs to be a clear understanding among all teachers within a department about what skills, prior knowledge, and academic dispositions students need to have in order to be successful in a 9th and 10th grade advanced-level class or an 11th and 12th grade IB course. With this clarity teachers will be able to make more informed decisions about the types of students who can likely make a successful jump from a standard-level class to an advanced-level class. When this common understanding is absent, teachers are forced to rely on their own assumptions and beliefs when making decisions (Bernhardt, 2012).

Professional development.

Teachers generally have little knowledge of the research on tracking. Hence, it should be made available to them. Because a large body of research documents the impact of tracking on teachers' pedagogical practices, the allocation of instructional resources, and student achievement and postsecondary opportunities, schools should address this practice as part of their professional development agenda. This could include a focus on broader issues such as the origin of tracking and its social and academic consequences, or more localized concerns like placement practices, recommendation criteria, and course enrollment patterns.

Perhaps most importantly, school-wide professional development opportunities need to assist teachers to understand their role in the current system of organizing students for instruction. One way to support this aim is to not only add action research to a school's professional development agenda, but to also ensure that local school districts and state boards of education value this work. This could be demonstrated by making

research an important component of the recertification process. By no means should teachers be forced into conducting research; however, they should certainly be encouraged. Enabling teachers to conduct research in their own schools has the potential to not only enhance professional development, but to also provide meaningful opportunities for teachers to play a major role in the transformation of the educational environment in which they work.

Creating a personalized education environment.

For schools to begin altering how students are placed classes, teachers need to not only be involved and invested in developing these new practices, but they also need to have increased opportunities to learn about their students' lives. This knowledge has the potential to lead to deeper understanding, fewer assumptions, and more personal guidance and academic support for students. To create an environment in which this is possible, school leaders need to adopt structural changes that not only provide a more comprehensive support system for students, but also create small, more personalized learning communities. This would enable teachers to make more informed decisions. For example, an advisory period that meets every other day for 30-45 minutes could be utilized to promote the development of student-teacher relationships and create opportunities for teachers to learn about their students both academically and personally. During this block of time teachers could provide additional academic support and advise students about course-taking, postsecondary opportunities, and possible career options.

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) report *Break Ranks: Changing an American Institution* (1996) offered several recommendations for developing a more personalized education environment. These include assigning every student a specific mentor during high school, requiring every student to develop a personal plan of action that includes academic progress and goals, and creating a more flexible master schedule that allows for the integration of innovative approaches for encouraging interactions between teachers and students. Examining K-12 intervention programs aimed at increasing the college-going rates of its participants, Gandara (1999) concluded, "the single most identified feature of success with individual students was a close, caring relationship with a knowledgeable adult who monitors the student's success" (p. 7). If school leaders want to shift how students are placed into classes, they should begin by providing teachers with more consistent opportunities to learn about their students, help them get the support they need, and assist them in planning for the future.

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