STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF PARTICIPATION IN TRACKED CLASSES THROUGHOUT HIGH SCHOOL: THE ETHIC OF JUSTICE, SCHOOL LEADERSHIP, AND CURRICULUM DESIGN

Robert N. Falkenstein

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

December 2007

Committee:

Patrick D. Pauken, Advisor

Ellen U. Williams
Graduate Faculty Representative

Joe Bailey

Mark A. Earley

Judy A. Zimmerman
ABSTRACT

Patrick D. Pauken, Advisor

While school leaders negotiate changing governmental mandates, tracking continues as the most implemented curriculum delivery model in American schools (Lovelace, 1999). There is a growing disconnect between governmental pushes toward a similar educational bar for all students and tracking, which encourages student achievement at fluctuating levels.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to reveal the experience of tracking for graduating high school seniors. Tracking is defined as dividing students into class levels for low, medium, and high achievers in each grade (Oakes & Lipton, 1994). A philosophical background demonstrated how the ethic of justice spectrum—the balance between the good of society and individual rights (Starratt, 1991)—applied to curriculum design. The impact of tracking on students’ school experiences was addressed. The six participants engaged in this study ranged all track levels.

The research questions were (1) How do 12th grade students describe their experience in tracked classes in high school?, (2) How does the essence of tracking impact 12th graders’ high school experiences?, and (3) How are students’ tracking experiences represented on the ethic of justice spectrum? An existing Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data was used to analyze and code the data (Moustakas, 1994). The thinking processes behind data transformation were highlighted.

The participants overwhelmingly supported tracking. Their experiences revealed five themes: (1) appropriateness of placement, (2) student effort and perceived teacher effort,
(3) similarity of instructional methods, (4) social influence of peers and family, and (5) view of others: students in different track levels and school leaders.

Tracking met the needs of participants according to individual ability levels. Tracking found its place on the ethic of justice spectrum toward the individual, nonconsequential end and away from utilitarian notions. The participants supported continued tracking practices but cited trusted, respected teachers as more influential than school principals or the tracking design itself.

School leaders were reminded that, from students’ perspectives, tracking is the preferred curriculum design. The ethic of justice was proven a useful evaluation tool of school policy and programming. Administrators were reminded to promote ventures that seek student input in decision-making activities and to uphold justice in schools by respecting students’ individual rights.
To my wife Rhonda and our boys Brock and Luke. Carpe Diem!

* * *

“Let your hook always be cast; in the pool where you least expect it, will be a fish.”

Ovid (43 BC-17 AD)
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Family support made my doctoral adventure possible. My wife, Rhonda, provided me with encouragement and also mothered two beautiful sons along the way. She contributed the most to my success, which made this degree a shared accomplishment. To my parents, Neal and Betty Falkenstein, for demonstrating how to set and reach goals and for providing me with the tools needed to handle multiple things simultaneously. To my parents-in-law, Ron and Carol Carpenter, for their babysitting, meals, and encouraging attitude.

Dr. Joe Bailey served as a mentor for me in my early adulthood, and I thank him for his listening ear as I changed to the field of education. His inclusion on my dissertation committee is yet another expression of his guidance. Dr. Mark Earley revealed to me the warmth that research methods emit after we embrace them. Dr. Judy Zimmerman helped me to develop into a better writer. Dr. Ellen Williams showed me ways to keep a holistic view of things.

I appreciated the assistance from my current employer, the Perrysburg Schools Board of Education. Its members, along with Dr. Michael Cline, former Superintendent, John Crecelius, Curriculum Director, and Michael Short, Principal, supported my research travels. Because of their willingness to get involved, I was able to experience the outer limits of academic research along the way. I am indebted. Special thanks also belong to Perrysburg High School teacher Amy Hochanadel who helped me to think through what the participants said.

Few people can claim to have even one Captain in their life as demonstrated by John Keating in Dead Poets Society. I have two Captains. Steven Ricard, Perrysburg High School English Teacher, breathed a life of academe into my thinking as my senior year teacher. He is responsible for my quest in education as a teacher and student. The things that we learn from our high school teachers last a lifetime.
I met Dr. Patrick Pauken while seeking information about the Leadership Studies Program at BGSU. The day changed my life because I figured that if he is there, I want to be there too. From teacher to admirer to cousin to Captain to my Dissertation Advisor, Dr. Pauken forever remains my friend. While justice and critique form Pat’s arms, his heart is filled with care. I have witnessed and experienced a Barbaric YAWP that will remain forever entrenched on my soul. My own YAWP contains a strength and clarity only realized because of Captain Pat Pauken.

To Mark Carroll, my cohort-mate and brother separated at birth. His continual support allowed me to succeed.

Lastly, to those former students of mine whose influence on my life is felt everyday. I celebrate your work ethic, drive to succeed, and willingness to accept responsibility for your own learning. Your voices germinated the idea for this research study.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION**

- Background of the Problem ................................................................. 1
- Purpose of the Study ............................................................................. 4
- Research Questions ............................................................................... 5
- Rationale ............................................................................................... 5
- Theoretical Framework ......................................................................... 6
- Significance of the Study ..................................................................... 7
- Definitions of Terms ........................................................................... 9
- Delimitations ........................................................................................ 11
- Limitations .......................................................................................... 12
- Organization of Remaining Chapters ..................................................... 13

**CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

- The Philosophy of Justice ................................................................. 14
  - Utilitarianism ................................................................................... 14
    - Aristotle’s Happiness ................................................................ 15
    - A Continuance of Utilitarianism .................................................. 17
  - Individual Rights .......................................................................... 18
  - Categorical Imperative ................................................................. 19
  - Justice as Fairness ........................................................................ 20
  - Justice and Entitlement ................................................................. 22
  - Justice in Schools: Lawrence Kohlberg ....................................... 22
CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY ................................................................. 53

Research Questions .................................................................................. 53

The Phenomenological Approach ............................................................... 53

Qualities of Phenomenology ................................................................... 53

Époche ....................................................................................................... 54

Bracketing ................................................................................................. 55

Community Context and its High School .................................................. 58

Methods ..................................................................................................... 60

Participant Selection ................................................................................ 60

Interview Protocol ................................................................................... 62

Data Collection and Analysis ................................................................. 63

Credibility and Trustworthiness ............................................................... 65

Triangulation of Participants ................................................................. 65

Peer Review .............................................................................................. 66

Member Checking ................................................................................... 67
Appropriateness of Placement ................................................................. 83

Satisfaction .......................................................................................... 84

Accurate Knowledge of Track Level ..................................................... 84

Pace of Instruction and Learning ............................................................ 85

Track Level and Future Plans ................................................................. 86

Importance of Track Level as a Schooling Aspect ............................... 88

Student Effort and Perceived Teacher Effort ........................................... 88

Effort and the Track System .................................................................. 89

Perception of the Teacher ...................................................................... 89

Content of the Class ............................................................................. 90

Similarity of Instructional Methods ....................................................... 91

Math Class ............................................................................................ 91

English Class ........................................................................................ 92

Social Influence of Peers and Family .................................................... 94

Peers ..................................................................................................... 94

Cliquers ................................................................................................. 94

Family Members .................................................................................. 95

View of Others: Students in Different Track Levels and School Leaders... 96

Other Track Levels ............................................................................... 96

View of School Leaders ....................................................................... 99

Summary ................................................................................................ 102

The Impact of Tracking on High School Experience ............................. 102
CHAPTER VI. FINDINGS: TRACKING AND THE ETHIC OF JUSTICE

Tracking is a Just System
Fairness
Appropriateness of Placement
Grade Point Average Calculations
The Ethic of Justice and Tracking
Motivating Factor of Tracking
Summary

CHAPTER VII. DISCUSSION

Return to Philosophy
Student Voice and Tracking
Reasons to Not Detrack
Demographics
Access to the Future
Peers and Friendships in Tracked Classes
Mobility
Student Achievement
Satisfaction
Teacher Impact
Leadership Practice Implications
Administrator’s Role
The Researcher’s Voice
Recommendations for Future Research
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>An Adaptation of the Justice Spectrum by R. J. Starratt (1991)</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Original Code List</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Revised Code List</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Final Codes That Encompassed Codes from the Original List</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

Public school boards employ curriculum directors and building administrators to maintain and lead the institutionalized practices within their schools. Oftentimes in high schools, the curricular structure has existed for many years without major changes related to how courses are offered to students, or the curriculum has existed as a continuing cycle, where innovations come and go (Earl & Katz, 2000; Sleeter & Grant, 1998). Given the constraints of teacher contracts, scheduling, and finances, school leaders refrain from making changes to a curriculum model already in place (Dayton, 2003; Kilgore, 1991).

One feature of many curriculum discussions involves tracking (homogeneous ability grouping). Tracking is defined as dividing students to create separate class strands or class levels for low, medium, and high achievers in each grade (Oakes & Lipton, 1994). For example, a high school English course at each grade level may be divided into an honors track, college preparatory track, and general education track. Tracking has appeared in schools for more than one hundred years and continues to exist as the most implemented curriculum design in American schools (Loveless, 1999).

Students in the Class of 2007 are unique because they are the first group who has experienced only a testing culture of education. Their education has been umbrellaed by such terms as “standardization”, “outcomes”, “state indicators”, and “achievement and graduation tests” (Academic, 2006). These students of the No Child Left Behind era have lived through mandates that created a similar educational bar for everyone. The practice of tracking seems counterintuitive to No Child Left Behind when considering that tracking takes away a standard bar and encourages students to excel. Because the tracked structure will continue to deliver the
curriculum, it may be working against the goals of a standardized education. It behooves administrators to revisit the curriculum design called tracking to see how it serves students today because most tracking research exists before or during *A Nation At Risk* (Kulik & Kulik, 1982; Oakes, 1985).

While the tracking model permeated schools during the 20th century, problems with it arose that resulted in “detracking” where students were grouped heterogeneously (Oakes, 1981). One problem involved ethics. Oakes (1986) found that tracking widens the educational gap rather than narrowing it, which results in inequitable educational opportunities. Gamoran (1987) recognized that in regard to post secondary schooling and income potential, students in the top tracks receive benefits that students in the low tracks never receive. The assignment of students into track levels was also ethically questioned (Oakes, 1985).

Other problems with tracking involved demographics. In the mid-1980s inclusion courses, another term for detracking, gained popularity because tracked classes were identified as race and gender disproportionate (Oakes, 1985). The tracking problems continued into social class, as white-collar families were represented in upper-tracks by an 83% margin, which resulted in lower tracks with a large percentage of students from blue-collar families (Shafer & Olexa, 1971). Also, a tracked curriculum often forced students into courses, thus not giving students actual curricular choice (Heck, Price, & Thomas, 2004). However, even after these problems were identified, tracking still continued.

Due to tracking’s consistent use, research needs to address a different problem: evidence identifying student satisfaction with tracking cannot be found in the literature of the past 20 years. Taylor (1980) examined the responses of tracked students according to students’ school experience, track choice, relationships, and future plans. Oakes (1981) reported that low track
and high track students are equally satisfied with their school experience. A key component related to satisfaction has been omitted: tracked high school students near graduation have not been given the opportunity for their voices to be heard. Therefore, research is needed to show what students think about tracking today, especially because satisfaction with curriculum design plays a major role in student success (Hallam & Deathe, 2002) and because tracking remains the prevalent curriculum design today. Studying tracking and student response simultaneously is necessary if school leaders are to consider the people that curricula impact the most.

An additional problem with research on tracking is that an ethical lens is most often left out. Specifically, the ethic of justice has been described as a continuum upon which to balance the good of society with individual rights (Starratt, 1991). The ethic of justice is a leadership model that helps leaders make decisions. When applied to an educational setting, the ethic of justice may be used to simultaneously portray the degree of justice for an entire student body and each individual student.

A multitude of research has discussed tracking issues but only in quantitative ways (Kulik & Kulik, 1982; Lou, Abrami, Spence, Poulsen, Chambers, & d’Apollonia, 1996; Oakes, 1981; Vanfossen, Jones, & Spade, 1987). Few studies have examined tracking from an open-ended, qualitative approach, which complements an ethics discussion. N. C. Johnson (2001) focused on how the ethic of justice is portrayed in tracked classes in elementary schools, but the ethic of justice has not been used as a theoretical framework for a study of tracking within the high school setting. The present study fills that gap by using the ethic of justice as a lens through which to understand student responses about living through the tracked curriculum at their high school. The qualitative responses from the students will contribute to the new field of ethics in
curriculum design. Not enough is known about the relationship between student experiences in tracked classes and the ethic of justice.

This study will serve as a guide for school leaders wishing to evaluate the tracking practices within their high schools. School administrators and board members are ultimately responsible for the curriculum design in their schools but may wonder, “What can we do?” Modifying the curricula is difficult to achieve on a whole-school scale, yet when problems with curricula appear, something needs to be done. The present study actively asks for student opinions, and it becomes a current school leader’s responsibility to take real-life information and use it to improve the curriculum. Therefore, this study ultimately leads to administrators’ roles and responsibilities associated with the popular and too often stated, “Doing what is best for students.” This study has immediate, tangible application to tomorrow’s students who graduate from a school where tracking is implemented.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to reveal the experience of tracking for six seniors at a Midwest public high school. Tracking is defined as dividing students to create separate class strands or class levels for low, medium, and high achievers in each grade (Oakes & Lipton, 1994). Through interviewing graduating seniors in each track level at one high school, tracking as a curriculum design and its influence on the high school experience will emerge. In order to contextualize the responses that students give, the ethic of justice (Starratt, 1991) will be applied as the leadership framework. While student reactions to tracking are primary, this study may be able to identify the location on the justice spectrum that student responses fall. Stated another way, from the opinion of tracked students this study attempts to place tracking on the ethic of justice spectrum. This may help to uncover if tracking is viewed by students as a just
system, and if so, whether tracking serves individuals or the collective student body. The ethic of justice is fully explained in CHAPTER 2.

To ensure a well-rounded approach, two 12th grade students in each of three track levels in English and math were interviewed twice during a two-week period. The three track levels are honors, college preparatory, and general education. The study took place in a Midwest suburban school of approximately 1500 students in grades 9-12.

Research Questions

The three questions guiding the current study are:

1. How do 12th grade students describe their experience in tracked classes in high school?

2. How does the essence of tracking impact 12th graders’ high school experiences?

3. How are students’ tracking experiences represented on the ethic of justice spectrum?

Rationale

In regard to the history of studies about tracking in the previous century, the literature’s application to present time is questionable. We are no longer living through A Nation At Risk or attempting to provide the financially equitable education of the 1990s. Today, in the era of No Child Left Behind, the climate is different. Revealing the experience of tracking for 12th graders means discovering whether or not individual student needs are met, amidst the national call for all students to succeed with a more standards-based curriculum. Extensive literature searches produced many studies and two meta-analyses on the topic of tracking and achievement (Kulik & Kulik, 1982; Lou et al., 1996). However no recent qualitative study has allowed for high school students to express what tracking means to them.
One way to provide further information about curriculum and leadership is to delve into the curriculum designs already in place in most American public high schools. A study about tracking as a curriculum model is relevant because it will shed light from students’ opinions onto larger issues such as justice in schools. More specifically, the ethic of justice (Starratt, 1991) will help pinpoint the presence of perceived justice within a tracked high school curriculum. This is a novel approach because research about the ethic of justice in curriculum design/tracking is especially scarce. By interviewing students from the three common track levels, some educational issues previously hidden from school researchers and leaders have become known. The present study explored 12th grade student experiences of being tracked throughout high school and interpreted those responses through an ethical framework.

Theoretical Framework

The ethic of justice is portrayed on a continuum where utilitarianism and individual rights serve as opposing principles (Starratt, 1991). The two overarching “schools of justice thought” are from the standpoint of social welfare or individual respect/choice. Starratt (1994) states that we should observe justice through the way that we govern ourselves. That is, we can uniformly apply justice standards to everyone in society, and as a result, we are all treated fairly.

Given that there are two main schools of thought on justice—a shared community that encourages the greatest good for the greatest number of people or, much differently, a social contract with individual rules—the ethic of justice serves this study well. It provides a model on which to place student experiences with a tracked curriculum; those experiences may highlight either end of the justice spectrum or a balance between the two. The tracking system in education itself requires some scrutiny in regard to the ethic of justice. It would be interesting to learn where today’s students place tracking on the ethic of justice spectrum. In other words,
where on a spectrum that is made up of polar justice ideals do tracking and student experiences fall? Bluntly, where do ethics and tracking meet for students graduating in 2007?

An additional ethics principle complements the justice discussion. The principle of equal treatment demands that those people situated equally are treated equally, and, conversely, those people situated unequally are treated unequally (Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 2005). This principle helps moral agents to provide reasons for their decision in an ethical dilemma, which is made possible by thinking about the most relevant factors within any ethical decision-making situation. In respect to the tracking issue, the principle of equal treatment will help to uncover the most important features of tracking from the viewpoints of the students who have lived the tracked experience. Only after tracking’s relevant factors are identified can the principle of equal treatment be applied to shed light on a multi-tracked system. Historical and current views of justice, with their related principles, are reviewed in CHAPTER 2.

Significance of the Study

This study serves as an ethics-based curriculum evaluation tool for building-level and district-level school leaders in districts that track students. Tracking is the most common method to deliver the curriculum in today’s American schools (Loveless, 1999), so this study emerges as important on a national level. School administrators may have curriculum or tracking policies already in place. However, in other schools the curriculum policy may be unnamed or outdated. In any case, the findings of this study will provide an opinion from six students who have experienced a tracked curriculum. These responses will provide school leaders and policymakers a chance to review ethical considerations related to their current use of tracking.

With the ethic of justice serving as the theoretical framework, there are many implications for applying it to the educational setting. The study provides to school leaders and
board members a lens for critiquing programs in their schools. Using the ethic of justice is a novel way to view the historically sensitive curriculum design called tracking.

This study provides a qualitative view from high school seniors who have been tracked in the 21st century. This study may inspire more qualitative tracking research in other grade levels and trigger future research about the ethics of tracking within specific content areas, particularly in an era of standards-based and outcomes-based education. Preexisting research on tracking occurred quantitatively and focused on student achievement or demographic issues (Oakes, 1985). Alternatively, the present qualitative study focused on student perceptions to provide a current response to tracking from students themselves. These student responses housed within an ethics framework provide a new approach to studying tracking.

An additional point of significance is that research on the positives and negatives of tracking for the past 20 years has mostly been ignored, given that the practice of tracking today is in the same form as previous versions. This study provides a new context and framework for viewing tracking. The purpose of the study is to reveal student experiences in tracking, so there is no goal to either support or refute tracking in schools. Rather, the study may result in educators taking a closer look at their current practice of tracking and deciding how to ensure that today’s students within this system are educated appropriately.

On a statewide level, this study reports the current conditions under school roofs. Legislators and statewide policy makers may realize that schools have negotiated the tides of school reform forever. The Great Depression, A Nation At Risk, No Child Left Behind, changed state indicators for achievement, more grade-level tests, and another “era” in the future yet to be named are met with the tracking model; these national and statewide occurrences have not shaped the state of tracking in our schools. Tracking will most likely continue. With this in
mind, students may be the ones to tell us how to modify tracking practices to promote ethical decision-making in curriculum design.

Definitions of Terms

The following list contains definitions of terms used in the study.

1. Ability: In addition to IQ, achievement, and standardized test scores, “ability” as used in this study also refers to motivation, work ethic, athletics, and environmental factors.

2. Benefit Maximization: When making a decision, the moral agent is obligated to calculate if the majority of people would benefit (Callahan, 1988).

3. Consequentialism: Justice attains moral correctness when we have made the decision based on the right consequences of that choice. If the consequences would be bad, Aristotle says that we would be acting immorally. Justice is served by selecting the desirable consequences first, and the moral agent will feel good about him or herself by doing what is best for everyone (Callahan, 1988).

4. Curriculum Design: The process of organizing and delivering courses to students (Vanfossen et al., 1987) including the link between learning objectives and outcomes.

5. Deontological: It is a person’s duty to follow laws and rules that will uphold the social contract into which each person plays a part. Kant applied deontological ethics. Based on a rule or principle, deontological ethics focused morality on duty. When facing a moral dilemma, the correct decision is made when people recognize their duty and then follow established rules to attain morality (Callahan, 1988).

6. Detracking: A movement that began in the 1980s to get rid of tracking and move students to heterogeneous grouping (Oakes, 1985).
7. Essence: In phenomenology, essence is the meaning of a collection of experiences (van Manen, 2002a).

8. Ethic of Justice: Balancing the common good and the rights of the individual when making justice-based decisions. The question becomes, “How do we govern ourselves while carrying out educating activities?” (Starratt, 1991, p. 191). The answer is by observing justice through the way that we treat each other.

9. Inclusion: Heterogeneous grouping of students of different ability levels into the same class. Inclusion is, in part, inspired by special education of children with disabilities known as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Oakes, 1985).

10. Justice: Plato defines justice as a function of harmony, which is individually achieved before being extended to others (Plato, 380 B.C.). Rawls defines “justice” as “fairness” (Rawls, 1971). Definitions differ by person or time period. See “Ethic of Justice” above.

11. Liberal egalitarianism: Being motivated by methods of equality more than individual rights. Considering many ideas at once and not being able to completely accept nor dismiss utilitarian or libertarian views (Howe, 1993). For example, the liberal egalitarian believes that unequal distribution of resources is ethical if the group receiving something has never received it before (Rawls, 1958).

12. Libertarianism: To be motivated by the freedom to choose and knowing that the individual exists for the good of society (Stewart & Blocker, 1987). The procedure for ensuring justice is more important than the realized outcomes of the process (Nozick, 1974). Government is eschewed; liberty is expressed.

13. Nonconsequentialism: Morality occurs when a person has the right to choose what to do and chooses to follow rules already in place. Individual equality to choose is more
important than considering the greatest good for society or the consequences of a
decision. Kant’s form of justice says to do what is morally right without dwelling on or
considering the consequences (Callahan, 1988).

14. Phenomenology: Used within an applied setting such as education, phenomenology as a
qualitative method uncovers the essence of lived experiences (van Manen, 2002a).

15. Principle of Equal Treatment: All people who are situated equally must be treated
equally; those people who are situated unequally are treated unequally (Strike et al.,
2005). A person decides upon relevant factors and uses them in justice decision-making.

16. Teleological: Here, actions are judged as moral, based on the consequences of the
decision (Callahan, 1988). Basically, what are the consequences for everyone else?
Similar to the consequentialist theory, Aristotle’s justice asks, “How will this decision
impact all other people in society?”

17. Tracking: Dividing students to create separate class strands or class levels for low,
medium, and high achievers in each grade (Oakes & Lipton, 1994). Tracking today is
prevalently based on ability level and post-secondary plans for education. Also known as
homogeneous ability grouping.

18. Utilitarianism: Doing what is best to produce the greatest good for the greatest number of
people. Principles are developed based on human rights and a sense of community.
Related to Benefit Maximization (Callahan, 1988).

Delimitations

This study intentionally includes 12th graders on the verge of graduation. It provides a
look into tracking after the students have experienced it for nearly four years in high school.
Additionally, only students who were on the same track level in English and math classes
throughout high school were included in the study, thus eliminating those students that changed tracks sometime over the high school experience or who transferred to the school. Furthermore, only students who were 18 years old were included in the study, thus eliminating seniors who were younger or older.

Data were collected from students who have been on the same track in English and math at the same high school. To avoid making this study a content issue (for example, tracked experience for English students), two content areas were used. Also, in English and math, the same number of tracks (three) is available to students at the particular school studied. In the social studies curriculum at the school, only two track levels are available, so it was left out as a participant selection criterion.

The study will be conducted at a Midwest suburban public high school. It was selected carefully among many choices. Researcher accessibility, familiarity with the community, and support of the faculty and administration made the choice appropriate. Also, the school serves a diverse group of students according to career aspirations, course selections, and abilities.

Phenomenology as a research design (which is explained in CHAPTER 3) was intentionally chosen over the case study approach. The goals of the study focus around students’ responses rather than tracking as a school-wide issue; therefore, the phenomenological design fits most appropriately. Likewise, allowing student experiences to reveal what occurs within tracking matches well with the phenomenological design.

Limitations

The data needed to be collected in the spring 2007 so that the 12th graders’ responses include as much of the entire high school experience as possible—presenting one possible limitation due to timing. For this reason, 18 year olds were selected so that the process for
Human Subjects Review would be faster by avoiding a full review. While it had been suggested that seniors in the springtime may be experiencing “senioritis” and may have provided distorted views of their high school experience, the data were collected several weeks before graduation. This was seen as a better option than collecting data from students in the fall of their senior year, for it would have omitted almost one-fourth of their high school experience.

Another timing limitation emerges. Perceptions of high school experiences change over time. The seniors’ viewpoints when nearing the end of high school are important, but their reflections are bound to change in later years. Students who have been out of high school for a few years may reflect differently on their tracking experience. Due to post secondary schooling, jobs, and other adult influences, these same students may reveal responses about tracking that are different from what they would report in their senior year of high school.

The phenomenology design has its own limitations. The number of student participants is limited so that depth in each interview can be achieved. Also, by including six participants, the results are not generalizable to a larger population such as the school or the nation.

Organization of Remaining Chapters

CHAPTER 2 provides a review of literature in regard to three frames: (a) historical and current perspectives of justice, (b) tracking in American schools, and (c) student responses to tracking. CHAPTER 3 highlights the methods and validity of this phenomenological study. CHAPTER 4 explicitly tackles the intricacies of transforming qualitative data. CHAPTERS 5 and 6 reveal the results. The discussion and implications are presented in CHAPTER 7.
CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the literature about three main areas related to the present study. First, a history of justice is provided from the stances of two popular schools of thought: utilitarianism and individual respect. Peripheral theories of justice are included. Next, a current view called the ethic of justice (Starratt, 1991) will be examined because it serves as this study’s leadership framework. After the justice discussion, tracking will be explored. While the pros and cons of tracking in the last 25 years are highlighted, a look into the history of tracking leads that discussion. Lastly, student experiences in tracking are provided.

The Philosophy of Justice

Justice as an ethical principle has traveled a long journey. For centuries, and even millennia, philosophers and ethicists have approached justice differently, largely as a response to their respective societies at that time. The justice pendulum has typically swung between two popular theories known as utilitarianism and individual respect. This pendulum spreads out justice to theorize the greatest good for the greatest number to, much differently, following rules to uphold a social contract agreed upon by each member of society (Strike et al., 2005). However, justice as an ethic has contained many side-roads to these two highways of thought. Some applied justice concepts such as distributive justice, the principle of equal treatment, libertarianism, and liberal egalitarianism are included. The justice pendulum, with its ancient, historical beginning in Greece, starts with an eye toward society.

Utilitarianism

Justice as a virtue served as a backdrop for dealing with individuals and entire societies. Starting in the 5th century B.C.E. justice appeared in social discussion, namely through Socrates’ influence. He spoke about how members in society were obligated to something larger than
themselves. While justice as an ethic was pioneered by Socrates through his public speeches, Plato contributed by putting his teacher’s words into written form through dialogue (Plato, 380 B.C.). Likewise, Aristotle contributed justice ideals to the written page. He wrote that passion and desire were to be squelched. Phrased more positively, Aristotle called for giving up individual freedom for the benefit of others while putting human reason into application on important issues such as moral virtues, politics, and ownership of property (Aristotle, 322 B.C.). Thus, the original thoughts of utilitarianism and consequentialism were born.

_Aristotle’s happiness_

Aristotle served as a justice forefather. In Plato’s school, the Socratic Method served as the means for investigation, questioning, and communication. As conversations turned to justice, Aristotle emerged to share his primary thought that justice is a complete virtue in how people should treat their neighbors (Constitution, 2005). Virtue appeared as two kinds: intellectual virtues nurtured through teaching and moral virtues learned from childhood through habitual practice (McPhail, 1982). Justice entered the ethics discussion as something that Aristotle needed to promote to the public, especially among adults with children, whom he hoped would pass on the virtue of justice through practice.

Aristotle’s comments on justice included not only the common areas of relationships among society members but also resource allocation (Aristotle, 322 B.C.). Known as distributive justice, all things needed to be given out equitably among the citizenship, with some added influence based on merit. The idea of merit falls separate from the wealth of an individual and refers to the moral activities that take place during a man’s life. With this in mind, merit is built through laboring for the benefit of others and upholding the aristocracy. Aristotle also postulated rectificatory justice for personal transactions that kept justice in place when dealing
with exchanges. One type of exchange, called *voluntary*, exhibits justice by ensuring (through the introduction of money) that exchanges are equal. The second type of exchange, called *involuntary*, forces a judge to intervene and restore to each his own.

In all cases, justice as Aristotle viewed it falls within teleological ethics. Here, actions are judged as moral, based on the consequences of those actions (*Ethics*, 2005; Kohlberg, 1984). The consequentialist theory appears here. Aristotle’s justice asks, “how will this decision impact all other people in society?” Basically, what are the consequences for everyone else and for society as a whole? Justice attains moral correctness when a decision is based on the right consequences of that choice. If the consequences would be bad, Aristotle says that we would be acting immorally. Justice is served by identifying the desirable consequences first so that the moral agent will feel good about him or herself by doing what is best for everyone—which sits as the key ingredient to the utilitarian theory of justice. In fact, Aristotle goes further to say that the greater good *is* happiness—that individuals need to always grow toward happiness.

To evaluate consequences and make the correct decision in the first place, Aristotelian justice focuses on what is called the *salient feature* of a moral dilemma. In relation to the Socratic Method, where constant discourse was the norm, arguers created situations to harbor their ideas. Aristotle practiced finding the key moral ingredient to the dilemmas. Aristotle believed in identifying the most relevant part of a situation and making moral choices based on that salient ingredient (Bricker, 1993). For example, in Sophocles’ play *Antigone*, two brothers dueled for the right to rule Thebes. Upon their deaths, only one brother was given burial rites, and when their sister, Antigone, went against King Creon’s decree and buried the other brother, a moral dilemma ensued.
King Creon identified state law as the most salient feature in the dilemma, whereas Antigone focused on family values to say that God’s laws were more important than man’s laws. Creon and Antigone’s difference in what is most important impacted their decisions. “From experience comes wisdom” is the ultimate lesson of the Greek play. Therefore, to consider what is just, people in moral dilemmas must first decide upon the salient ingredient of the situation. The result is justice in action and practice.

A continuance of utilitarianism

Ideals of utilitarian justice started with the ancient Greeks such as Plato and Aristotle yet continued to influence future philosophical discussion. Over 2000 years later, Jeremy Bentham reinvestigated the typical utilitarian views. Bentham’s principle of utility is defined as “that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or…to promote or to oppose that happiness” (Bentham, 1948, p. 2). He agreed that the consequences of human action exemplify the merit inherent to utilitarian ideals. However, he added to justice that the consequences should achieve pleasure and avoid pain (Bentham). Later called “hedonism”, Bentham pushed further to say that the amount of happiness in a society is based on the sum of each individual’s happiness. However, “each to count for one and none for more than one” (Singer, 1990, p. 492) readily reflects the moral equity of Bentham’s ethical system. Bentham’s ideas pushed utilitarianism to equitably provide the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people.

A generation later, John Stuart Mill defended much of Bentham’s work and realized two stances within utilitarianism previously unknown in philosophy circles. First, Mill recognized a difference between moral and bodily pleasures (Mill, 1863). He proposed that participants in
society must go beyond their hedonistic nature and realize the pleasures that come from intellectual thought. While attempting to increase the good of all and create a just society, we first must realize that the greatest good refers to the moral integrity of individuals.

Secondly, Mill stated that a person could not always stop and evaluate consequences to determine whether or not an action improved society for all members. Therefore, Mill’s idea of “pleasure” derived from within a person based on deliberately serving the happiness of others before self (Mill, 1863). Mill argued that we are bound to live by a preconceived set of rules that allow for justice to be exhibited in our actions, thus alleviating the need to evaluate every action we take. A person’s individual moral principles, when set in advance, help to guide all people (the society) toward the greater good even when individuals’ moral principles vary.

It has been established that utilitarianism is one of the grand theories of justice. Having lasted for over 2000 years, utilitarianism is still expressed in today’s versions of a just society (e.g., Starratt, 1991). However, it is only one side of a multisided argument. I now turn to utilitarianism’s opposite: respecting individual rights.

Individual Rights

If utilitarianism were to serve as one end of a justice spectrum, then individual respect/choice would be positioned on the opposite end. Here, justice is present in society when the system is concerned with respecting the individual’s right to pursue and achieve moral autonomy. Independently, the decision-maker decides whether or not to follow rules that are in place to ensure justice for all. It is a person’s moral duty to follow laws that will uphold the social contract into which each person plays a part.
**Categorical imperative**

In the 1770s Immanuel Kant provided the categorical imperative (to be described below) as a way to promote justice in society. Individuals were empowered to act in ways that all humans should act, thus striving for universal laws of ethical behavior. Rather than placing societal needs first, individuals constructed behaviors that fit themselves into a harmonious society. Recognizing the importance of others rather than serving self produces justice. However Kant’s ideas differ from Aristotle’s view that outcomes are measured consequentially. For Kant, priority of choice over consequence is given. Kant meant for people to follow rules that would be fitting for anyone in that situation (C. E. Johnson, 2001).

Kant applied deontological ethics. Based on a rule or principle, deontological ethics focus morality on duty. When facing a moral dilemma, the correct decision is made when a person recognizes his or her duty and then follows established laws to attain morality. Based on a nonconsequentialist view, Kant’s form of justice says to do what is morally right without considering consequence as the primary matter (C. E. Johnson, 2001). Morality occurs when a person has the right to choose what to do and chooses to follow rules of conduct that are already in place. Accordingly, individual respect is more important than considering the greater good for society (Bricker, 1993).

The rule that Kant developed which has lasting impact is called the categorical imperative. Earlier, Kant had developed 12 categories that helped a person perceive things such as unity, substance, and existence (Vincent, 2003) from which a person could hypothesize how to act. However, thinking about something does not always fit a situation’s criteria. Sometimes a person is moral simply by acting. Kant’s categorical imperative includes three ideas: (a) act on a rule that should become universal law, (b) act on a rule that should both become universal law
and does not contradict the laws of nature or the best version of the world that we can perceive, and (c) treat yourself and all others equally and not as just means to an end—rather as ends in themselves (McCormick, 2001). To act justly is to independently choose to follow rules applicable to everyone. The moral agent will feel good about himself or herself only after the decision is made and once the person reflects on making a dutiful decision, regardless of the consequences.

*Justice as fairness*

To continue the nonconsequentialist side of justice, John Rawls enters the discussion. Rawls cannot accurately be described as supporting individual moral autonomy over societal concerns. However, his views as a liberal egalitarian (to be described later under *Applied Justice*) have some similarities to other nonconsequentialists. He theorized hypothetically about a society that lived according to a contract. The social contract has been used at varying times to help lead a discussion about justice, even though the social contract itself has various meanings (Rawls, 1971). Here, the social contract is a guideline by which each person must abide. Doing so produces the just society. Rawls started with an important supposition—that people who agree to such a contract primarily care about themselves first (Rawls, 1958). We see justice as an individual’s liberty reflected as Rawls’ starting point. People within the society agree to follow the rules postulated by Rawls’ theory.

To account for the fact that society members would selfishly wish to be at the top of society rather than at the bottom Rawls included a *veil of ignorance* in his theory (Rawls, 1971). The veil of ignorance prevented citizens from knowing their hierarchical social status so that rules within the social contract were created fairly for everyone. The citizens would not know of their own characteristics or other factors that might influence their decision-making. When the
veil of ignorance is lifted, then, we do know our status and must not consider that status when making decisions. Only then may the social contract’s rules be applied justly to everyone. People might have to give up a little of their own freedom for the benefit of others because it is the moral thing to do. This veil of ignorance along with the social contract creates further implications.

When society members do not know their hierarchical status, yet would agree to a social contract, certain effects would be realized. First, individuals would be afraid of their social position because they actually may be located at the bottom of a societal scale. Second, they would wish to create rules within the social contract that would lift those at the bottom to the highest level in society. Third, equal distribution of resources would fail because the most talented people would work less, receive the same resources as everyone else, thus lowering the actual wealth of everyone. Therefore, once the veil of ignorance is lifted, the most disadvantaged group would allow an unequal distribution of resources as long as the most advantaged group gave back to the others, which has been called the “difference principle” of distributive justice (Zucker, 2001, p. 76). With these items in mind, Rawls has turned justice away from equality and toward fairness.

While justice as fairness was a new idea at the time, its effects rippled future justice discussions for various reasons. If the individual agrees to Rawls’ hypothetical social contract, then that contract would contain rules that benefit the least advantaged group in society, while allowing for some castes to remain in order to benefit everyone. Also, the changes in justice that Kant realized are further exemplified here: justice is an individual’s choice about whether or not to follow rules within the contract. However, Rawls softens Kant’s extreme form of
nonconsequentialism because to Rawls the veil of ignorance forces people to at least consider others of a lower status.

**Justice and entitlement**

At some point, an opposition to Rawls becomes clear. People who adopt the social contract must also give up some of their individual liberties. While *justice* may be served through Rawls’ contract, *freedom* is partially erased. Libertarian ideals (to be described in detail below) are highlighted by the work of Robert Nozick, who stated that the procedure for ensuring justice is more important than the realized outcomes of the process (Nozick, 1974).

Where Rawls used the hypothetical social contract, veil of ignorance, and difference principle to ensure for justice in distribution, Nozick claimed that Rawls’ initial foundation is unjust on its face. Contrary to Rawls, Nozick holds onto an individual’s right to keep what is his, acquire on his own, and have the right to transactions. The Entitlement Theory, when applied to distributive justice, includes an individual’s freedom to *acquire* and *transfer* resources, called *holdings* (Nozick, 1974). An individual’s freedom to barter comes before the individual’s obligations to justice.

**Justice in schools: Lawrence Kohlberg**

In the 1960s, justice as an ethic gained new application in schools with the work of Lawrence Kohlberg. Kohlberg developed six stages of moral development into which all people are placed given their age and ability to reason (Kohlberg, 1984). That model will be briefly developed here for two reasons: (a) the notions for justice appear in different places within Kohlberg’s model, and (b) justice is being used as a tool to measure the moral atmosphere of an organization. In addition to outlining Kohlberg’s views of justice, we will look at how his work impacted justice in American schools.
Six stages of a person’s moral development are divided into three levels according to Kohlberg’s model (1984) with each level containing two stages. Level 1, or preconventional, includes no differentiation of morals and a need to meet one’s own needs and demands. Avoiding punishment and deal making happen here. In level 2, the conventional level, forming relationships with others occurs. A person should be “good” and adhere to the Golden Rule. Also, laws and rules are followed in most cases. A person in this level starts off not caring about consequences and advances to a more societal view. Level 3, or postconventional, obligates a moral agent to think of the welfare of others as a group (consequences) and the utilitarian ideals of doing what is best for the greatest number of people. Principles are developed based on human rights and a sense of community. People at the highest level (stage six) follow their own principles rather than societal conventions, while keeping in mind the universal value of others. This review of Kohlberg’s stages warrants more discussion in terms of where and how justice occurs because they are germane to understanding his components of justice.

Kohlberg talks about how justice is served according to the location of a person within his model of moral development. For example, a person in stage three would be considered a nonconsequentialist because a person follows rules simply because the rules are there to be followed. However, by stage five a person has learned to think about how actions and decisions will affect others—a move toward consequentialism. Then, at stage six, nonconsequentialism reappears once a person realizes how his or her own moral autonomy fits into the larger society. Overall, he states, “…the core of justice is the distribution of rights and duties regulated by concepts of equality and reciprocity” (Kohlberg, 1984, p. 184). People act morally when they realize the need for justice. Whether following consequentialism or nonconsequentialism, the justice spectrum is evident in Kohlberg’s moral development theory.
As a balance of justice and moral development has entered the discussion, we can see how Kohlberg’s work penetrated the school setting where millions of high school students are impacted by the decisions of school leaders. Kohlberg entered dialogue about school improvement when he suggested that students needed to actively practice moral development. In what Kohlberg called “moral musical chairs” (Schrader, 1993, p. 92) students should be exposed to a higher stage on Kohlberg’s model to encourage them to avoid comfort in their current stage of moral development. This movement was possible in two ways.

The first way to assist moral development in schools is through dilemma discussions (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). Teachers would present cases where students practice looking into the morality of decision-making. Students are grouped heterogeneously, based on their varying stages of moral development because students learn better when grouped with non-similar people (Oakes, 1985; Schrader, 1993). As dilemmas are posed, students work in small groups to think through the moral dilemma, which causes moral development in individuals.

The second suggestion by Kohlberg to increase moral development in schools was through what he called the Just Community (Power et al., 1989). Here, schools operated democratically by including students in decision-making at an institutional, school-wide level. The process of decision-making helps students to realize advancements to a higher moral stage. In turn, administrators increased their moral development by realizing the effects of their decisions in real-life examples. Kohlberg’s work helped to provide a just version of education—by individuals learning moral growth and schools’ responsibility to provide an arena for moral growth. Justice in recent years accounted for how to make decisions in settings where communal responsibility and individual respect were both important.
**Applied Justice**

There are some justice ideals that cannot be called either utilitarian or individualistic. Here, applied justice principles are explained to round out the justice spectrum. While previously mentioned, the concepts of distributive justice and the principle of equal treatment are briefly explored. Furthermore, libertarianism and liberal egalitarianism are added here. Last, case law about tracking is featured.

**Distributive justice**

Firstly, distributive justice has already been discussed as the equal or fair way that resources are spread out to all society members. About resource allocation, Aristotle recognized the importance of distributive justice in a utilitarian sense. Rawls and Nozick took their own stances on distribution of resources where the system of justice is favored because of an individual’s own rights. Rawls’ idea of justice as fairness and Nozick’s thoughts on equality extended to distribution of resources as well. Distributive justice has attempted to provide resources equally, fairly, or based on motives of individual freedom.

**Principle of equal treatment**

Secondly, consider the principle of equal treatment. All people who are situated equally must be treated equally; those people who are situated unequally are treated unequally (Strike et al., 2005). It is important to decide upon relevant factors when making justice choices. Aristotle called this the salient feature of an argument (Bricker, 1993). That is, when examining a situation or a particular value of the decision-maker, what factors are most important to determining what choice to make? Conversely, ignore those factors that are not relevant to the situation. Applying the equal treatment principle will help a person decide how justice can occur. We can apply this rule to achieve moral autonomy. Similarly, there exists a principle of
equal respect (Strike et al.). Treating others as ends rather than means, giving moral agents the freedom and ability to choose, and realizing that all others are of equal value defines equal respect. So, when addressing a possible conflict of justice, the moral agent is to reduce the situation down to its most critical, important aspect. Only then can any just decision arise.

Now, we may ask, what are the salient features of a tracked system? Or, what might tracked students divulge as the most influential component of a tracked system? Are we to address the consequences of tracking, the initial foundation of how tracking was developed or the school leaders, teachers, and students who live within the tracked system? While the relevant factors for tracking will be broken down later in this chapter, some initial discussion is now needed. Grade point average (GPA), age, grade, standardized test scores, or career interest surveys are all factors that contribute to a student’s track placement (Kulik & Kulik, 1982; Oakes, 1985; Vanfossen et al., 1987), but we do not yet know which factors are most relevant.

Libertarianism

Thirdly, libertarianism was expressed earlier as the belief in holding onto personal freedoms and liberties at any or nearly any cost. Libertarians believe that the government should play a small role in society by serving as a minimal type of watchman to thwart crime or ensure that individuals may freely transfer their goods (Howe, 1993). However, problems may arise when only the most aggressive citizens benefit, which may leave a small number to realize the best out of this system of justice. Earlier, Nozick reminded us to focus on the process of justice more than the outcome. In relation to tracking, libertarianism emerges as a tool to evaluate the procedural aspects of how tracking is implemented.
Liberal egalitarianism

Fourthly, liberal egalitarianism is motivated by methods of equality more than individual rights. This version of equality is variable, though, because inequality may sometimes be justified (Howe, 1993). The liberal egalitarian believes that unequal distribution is ethical if the group receiving something has never received it before, as Rawls highlighted earlier. It is motivated by a snapshot of justice or current state of things at any given time. Because the lines between libertarianism and liberal egalitarianism are blurred, how might they appear in an argument about tracking?

Case law and tracking

There are a few court cases that challenged the tracked system of education. In Hobson v. Hansen (1969) the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia ruled against tracking because of the disproportionate number of African Americans placed in lower tracked classes (Oakes, 1985). Upon desegregation, the District of Columbia Public Schools placed most African American students into the lowest track, based on test scores. The court called for the school district to eliminate the track system because it desegregated students by social class and race. The court found that ability grouping as practiced in the school denied equal opportunity for minority students and contradicted the premise of the tracking system. Hobson v. Hansen was the first court case to acknowledge the stratification that occurs in curriculum design, namely tracking (Shafer & Olexa, 1971).

In Larry P. v. Riles (1984), a class action suit was brought against the San Francisco Unified School District. The court case began in 1972. The school’s procedure for placing students into an Educable Mentally Retarded (EMR) program included using IQ test scores. The local court’s decision was reaffirmed by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, which
held that using IQ scores as the sole factor for placing students into an EMR track was inappropriate and discriminatory against race and national origin. However, the last court decision in the case refuted a different aspect of the original decision that using the IQ test scores violated the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. Nonetheless, the IQ tests were deemed culturally and racially biased against black students which, when used to make EMR placements, isolated black children into a program that was perceived as a dead-end for students.

Also, in *People Who Care v. Rockford Board of Education School District No. 205* (1994), the federal district court for the Northern District of Illinois found that the tracking system intentionally segregated students on the basis of race (Welner, 2001). The segregation occurred as restructuring within the district brought about the closing of some schools. Given the examples above, tracking is not beyond the reach of state or even national law.

In order to refocus this discussion, a current view of justice is now explored. The ethic of justice (Starratt, 1991) has taken the justice theories and principles explained thus far and reduced them into a spectrum that we can use today. Given the many ideas on the topic of justice, previous philosophers could only agree with one another in part. The present approach to justice is to seek a better balance among all justice considerations.

The Ethic of Justice

As we have studied the history of justice, now we turn toward justice in contemporary society. Given the different views already presented, one spectrum called the ethic of justice places justice ideas on a continuum, where serving society and respecting individuals serve as the polar ends (Starratt, 1991). The spectrum also includes peripheral justice theories that are placed somewhere in the middle of the continuum. Above all, Starratt’s justice spectrum tries to convince moral agents to balance their views. In the arena of school leadership and policy, the
ethic of justice is a valuable tool that can be applied today. Starratt (1991) states that we govern ourselves by observing justice.

*Justice and Serving Society*

According to Starratt’s spectrum (1991) the left side identifies the society as necessary to consider when making ethical decisions. The ideas postulated by Aristotle, Bentham, and Mill that all contain utilitarianism are positioned here. It contains the consequentialist view of being responsible for how a decision will impact all others in society. Communitarian in nature, societal ethics is teleological because just decisions are based on how the results of those decisions affect society. To discuss this side of ethics, some other information is necessary.

That a decision should be based on perceived consequences, which maximize the benefits for society, relates to utilitarian ideals. Utilitarianism focuses on achieving the greatest good for the greatest number of people in society (Strike et al., 2005). Therefore, when making a decision, the moral agent is obligated to calculate the consequences and determine if the majority of people would benefit, which is also known as the principle of benefit maximization (Strike et al.). The questions then become, “What is the good to be maximized?” and “Who determines what is good?” When making that distinction, people are to examine the salient or relevant factors, which Aristotle initiated. In relation to ethics as a societal concern, utilitarianism and the principle of benefit maximization work together to achieve morality as it relates to the whole rather than to the individual.

*Justice and Respecting Individual Rights*

On the other side of Starratt’s spectrum, respecting individual rights is concerned with achieving moral autonomy. Philosophers such as Kant and Nozick are situated at this end while Kohlberg is nearby. Free to choose, the decision-maker decides to follow rules that are in place.
There is no decision of whether or not to be moral because following a social contract (of rules) assures justice for all. Thus, the “respect for individuals” idea of justice falls within a deontological construct. It is a person’s duty to follow laws that will uphold the social contract into which each person plays a part. Nonconsequentialism is evident here because the rules themselves identify how to act morally; individuals think in terms other than consequences. One application would say, “Simply follow the rules, and justice will occur.” A second application would be that challenging flawed rules is also just, an idea supported in stage six of Kohlberg’s model. In both cases, and in regard to school administration, the leader is the person making and enforcing the rules. Starratt’s work encourages us to ask how we shall govern ourselves, rather than following existing rules.

To govern ourselves, we are given the principle of equal treatment. Also, the idea of libertarianism calls for the respect of individual rights. To be motivated by the freedom to choose and to know that the individual exists for the good of society is libertarianism (Stewart & Blocker, 1987). Government is eschewed; liberty is expressed. Plus, the procedural aspects of a decision become more important than the realized substance of the outcome.

This end of Starratt’s spectrum focuses on the individual, so Kohlberg’s work would be placed near this end with one distinction: Kohlberg warned that justice occurs on a societal level too. Kohlberg’s model is rules-based (deontological) and reflects the individual side of Starratt’s spectrum. Even though Kohlberg argued for the respect of each person’s rights, he recognized a larger community where individuals are a part. He claimed that justice decisions need to occur simultaneously among individuals and the larger place where we live. If we think back to Kohlberg’s Just Community discussion, we are reminded that the students undertaking moral
growth are learning how to grow morally so that they can reason independently within the larger world that they live.

Middle-ground Justice

There exists a middle ground on Starratt’s spectrum that features a blend of societal and individual justice. It is the liberal egalitarianism postulated by Rawls (Howe, 1993; Starratt, 1991). Equality is important but takes a liberal stance by including ideas of fairness. Equality can happen for one group one time and another group another time, which is an application of the principle of equal treatment. When injustice occurs, it may be permissible because chances are that the injustice was deserved or may be correctable in the future. For example, Rawls’ views of distributive justice state that unequal (but fair) distribution is allowed. For Rawls, his liberal side is substantiated within Starratt’s individual view of justice, while Rawls’ egalitarian views are likely to swing somewhere toward the middle of the spectrum.

Essentially, liberal egalitarians consider many ideas at once and cannot completely accept nor dismiss utilitarian or libertarian views (Howe, 1993). They remain nonconsequentialists in their motivation (like all libertarians) but reject the libertarian view of protecting the liberty of the most disadvantaged group on the same terms as liberty is protected for all. Instead, more favor is offered the most disadvantaged group, as fairness would require. On the other side, utilitarian views are rejected because of the amount of government interference with basic freedoms; the utilitarian equality principle limits too heavily the fundamental rights of the individual, which is the cornerstone of the liberal egalitarian’s stance.

In Practice

Starratt asks, “How do we govern ourselves while carrying out educating activities?” (Starratt, 1991, p. 191). He later answers his question by saying that it is possible through
“observing justice” (Starratt). We now know that the justice Starratt speaks of includes every view of justice mentioned in the chapter, but we are reminded to visualize justice on a balance beam of sorts, where utilitarianism and individualism serve as the ends with liberal egalitarianism appearing somewhere in the middle. The key is to balance our views based on the most important features of the situation. Applying the ethic of justice to both leadership and education is a seamless task. Therefore, the Ethic of Justice (see Figure 1) has emerged as the leadership framework for the present study.

Figure 1. An Adaptation of the Justice Spectrum by R. J. Starratt (1991).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serving Society</th>
<th>Respecting Individual Rights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aristotle</td>
<td>Kant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bentham</td>
<td>Nozick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mill</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rawls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kohlberg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Liberal Egalitarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consequential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nonconsequential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teleological</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deontological</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Utilitarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Libertarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Benefit Maximization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Principle of Equal Treatment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ethic of justice is suited well for use in the educational setting (Starratt, 1994). Educational administrators strive to balance the school’s vision, standards imposed by governmental agencies, wishes of the teachers, and education of the students. School leaders
must also simultaneously consider what is best for the common good while respecting individual rights of school participants (Starratt, 2005b). There is no clear-cut answer for how to accomplish this balance; however, the ethic of justice helps administrators to seek this balance of justice in their schools. The ethic of justice emerges as an evaluation tool.

Consider the following scenarios: to exemplify a just school, there are issues related to school functions and practices. Also, what about the moral growth of the students? It behooves school leaders to evaluate current practices as well as the humanitarian aspects of education. Known as presence, the school administrator is responsible for ensuring that the people within the organization are surrounded by a culture that exhibits ethical behavior (Starratt, 2004). It reasonably follows that using the ethic of justice to evaluate current school situations will present ethics as an important ingredient to school life.

In order to encourage a culture of ethics, we are directed as people in administrative leadership positions to take on certain tasks ourselves. School leaders are inundated with outside mandates such as federal testing requirements or meeting a state’s educational outcomes for each grade level. Yet, these same agencies usually state the goals to be met without sharing resources or knowledge for how to make it happen. The flow of information travels from top down. Evaluation of success falls onto the school leaders. If the people who impose new regulations were the same people to implement, review, and evaluate them, then justice would be exhibited more readily (Starratt, 1988). If the government’s role were to promote social justice by protecting disadvantaged groups while promoting the benefit of all, then we would see changes in the current system of education that currently encourages standardization for everyone at all levels. An example of standardization is No Child Left Behind because it encourages all students to achieve a standard academic level.
Given the latter example, a pragmatist might say that, in reality, evaluation of programs
falls onto the administrators’ laps. Without having the tools to do so, great school leaders are
expected to revisit practices in their schools to assess whether justice is being served. While
there does not exist an ethical “cookbook” to provide answers to ethical dilemmas (Lashway,
1996), the present study suggests that the ethic of justice is a most appropriate lens through
which to evaluate the presence of ethics in daily school practice.

The Curriculum

While there are a multitude of areas within school life that need an ethical evaluation, the
school curriculum emerges in the present study as most important. When thinking about the
curriculum, justice emerges to shed light on whether students as a whole and as individuals are
being served appropriately by the way that the curriculum is delivered to them. There are other
ethical influences. The ethics of care and critique emerge as different yet related to the ethic of
justice (Noddings, 2005; Starratt, 1991). Nonetheless, when considering curriculum delivery,
justice remains the lens of the current study.

The school curriculum shapes the world of the student and provides the very foundation
on which students learn. If school leaders are to account for the many students at various stages
of moral development then the curriculum ought to serve each individual’s needs by providing
authentic learning activities suitable for the learner rather than a “one-way appropriation of a
prefixed menu of abstract right answers” (Starratt, 2005a). It might follow that given the moral
stages of development, the practice of tracking as a curriculum delivery tool best aligns a
student’s current situation with his or her own future goals, thus serving to maximize the benefits
for the entire school population. While tracking has crept into the current conversation, it will
be completely explored soon. Prior to that discussion though, a reminder becomes apparent.
School curriculum is the avenue for how ethics is promoted to students, both in structure and actual student outcomes.

*Ethic of Justice as Conceptual Framework*

The first part of examining the practice of tracking through the ethic of justice lens is to identify the salient features (or relevant factors) of the issue (Bricker, 1993). From my own experience, a list of considerations about the students includes ability level, age, academic history, interest in the subject, peer influence, and future career goals. A list of considerations at the building level includes experience of teachers, ability of the principal to evaluate, willingness of the staff, length of the school day, and scheduling factors. At the institutional, or district-wide level, the considerations might include contract stipulations, use of tracking per grade level, wishes of the community, and the budget.

If the previous lists were pared down, the issue remains that the practice of tracking, if it is just, falls somewhere on Starratt’s justice spectrum. At this point, we do not know where. So who can provide the answer? Rawls might tell us that tracking benefits the least advantaged group (students at the lowest track level), assuming the lowest tracked students receive the most help, while also providing fair resources to the highest ability students. Rawls might like the idea of No Child Left Behind because it attempts to educate students to the same standard, yet Rawls may see that tracking does not seek equal outcomes. Kohlberg may realize that the moral development differences in students of the same age are accounted for in tracking by providing multiple levels of education. This is because Kohlberg says that cognitive and social development precede moral development (Kohlberg, 1984). However, Rawls’ and Kohlberg’s views might contradict their justice stance if tracking provides the greatest good for the greatest number where the minority remains with little or no benefits.
Aristotle, Mill, and Bentham may say that tracking outcomes benefit everyone by providing each person with the tools necessary to work successfully in society, while Nozick may complain about the procedure of tracking unless everyone has an equal opportunity to move to higher tracks. Perhaps the principle of equal treatment comes into play. In a tracked environment, those students who can do more, do more; those who can do less are placed in a track commensurate with their ability. Looking solely at individual philosophers to come up with tracking’s location on the ethic of justice spectrum will not provide the answer.

Adults run the school but do not experience it the way that young people experience the typical school day. If we are to ask building level administrators, teachers, and parents to pinpoint the justness of tracking, their responses become filtered by those who do not really experience tracking. So, if we ask district-level curriculum coordinators and superintendents, who may be presumed as the most educated people on the topic, maybe we get their side of a multifaceted issue. Yet most central office administrators will agree that their position and office location (oftentimes located outside of an active school building) further removes them from daily school activities.

The present study is situated upon the premise that students are the most appropriate evaluators of the tracked experience because they live through it each day of high school life. Students have perhaps unknowingly recorded their experience with tracking, even though they may not *call* it tracking. Tracking might be there as a system only. While students have some choice within the tracked system, most of the time, they are placed and kept at their level (Hallinan, 1996). By examining student responses to tracking, we can then situate its practice upon the justice balance beam. More so than that, we include the voice of students as the integral part to including ethics in program evaluation. Including the student perspective in
moral matters related to the curriculum is essential if curriculum implementation or change is to be addressed (Lovat, 1998).

The discussion about justice in historical and current perspectives now closes. Given the long debate between societal needs and respecting individual rights, we realize that the debate will continue. Thankfully, the ethic of justice helps us to balance all justice ideas and is proven as a current way to frame the debate. Using the ethic of justice as the present study’s conceptual framework helps to support the notion that evaluating the curriculum from an ethical stance is possible. Now, we turn toward the tracking issue.

A History of Tracking

The issue of a tracked curriculum model rested on then current ethical grounds in the 1900s (Loveless, 1999; McDonald, 2004). In order to discuss the ethical issues surrounding the tracking debate, a discussion of the background of tracking is necessary. After defining and examining the history of tracking in American schools, the other side of the issue emerges. While much research targets why **detracking** should occur (Oakes, 1985; Page, 1991; Rich, 1993), the detracking model enters the argument as an alternative to tracking. Next, supported use of tracking for delivery of the curriculum in the last 25 years is given (Agne, 1999; Kulik & Kulik, 1982; Loveless; Zimmer, 2003). Then, this section will propel us toward tracking today and the existence (or nonexistence) of student voice on the topic. While tracking has metamorphosed through the last 100 years, the following definition serves as a guideline: tracking occurs when school administrators divide students to create separate class strands or class levels for low, medium, and high achievers in each grade (Oakes & Lipton, 1994).
Tracking in the Early 20th Century

Tracking provided the basis for schooling in the 1900s. It consisted of grouping students by common threads such as IQ and standardized test scores. Curriculum was designed to arrange courses by level of difficulty based on academic status. This created core class levels, for example in English and math, which served a target group of students. Once students were grouped homogeneously by academic level, they were placed on a curricular track that continued to the next grade.

Originally the tracks were career specific: college-bound, vocational, general labor (Loveless, 1999). Horace Mann, an educational reformer during the 1800s, argued for educational leaders to design curricula specific to the needs of all students (Oakes & Wells, 2004). Mann’s reform changed track levels to a career-based approach such as white collar, factory or vocational. In this way, a vocational worker, for example, could get the classes he or she needed and immediately enter the workforce after high school. White collar tracked students worked through courses geared toward college preparation.

However, by the mid-20th century, largely due to the industrial revolution, the curricular tracks were redesigned solely on academic rank, and course names reflected levels of difficulty such as honors, regular, and remedial (McDonald, 2004). A second reformer, James Conant, gained importance during this time, when, in addition to arguing for larger, more populated high schools and a reform of educational finance, he recognized how a changed tracking system would benefit students in the 1950s and beyond. He called for getting rid of the tracks by profession (academic, commercial, and trade jobs) and redesigning tracking based solely on ability level (McDonald, 2004). In Conant’s view, tracking helped all students to reach their maximum potential, and ultimately, society’s jobs will be filled with the right people. Tracking
based on ability level with courses available for each of those levels is the most current form of tracking in today’s schools.

As tracking has a history in American schools dating back to the late 1800s, the curriculum design has lasted for over one hundred years. However, many researchers began to question justice considerations of tracking in the 1980s when unfavorable reflections of the tracked curriculum came into view (Oakes, 1985; Oakes, 1986). Since then, detracking has been the word of reform in our schools. It is a battle that will continue into the future.

Detracking 1980-2000

During this 20-year period, while the practice of tracking flourished in American schools, new thoughts about it erupted. In this section, the movement to detrack schools is explained as an opposing stance to tracking. Detracking is defined as dismantling the existing tracking structure to promote access to challenging courses for students (Wells & Serna, 1996). While the following paragraphs give more specific information, an overarching reason to detrack classes is the argument that diversity of cognition among a classroom of students (students who have a wide range of abilities) is an effective teaching technique (Hallinan, 1994).

In 1985, researcher Jeannie Oakes initiated the detracking movement when her book *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality* was published. From that point to today, many critiques fire directly against tracking (Goodlad, 1979; Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, & Goodlad, 2004; Oakes & Lipton, 1994; Page, 1991; Rich, 1993; Wells & Oakes, 1998; Wheelock, 1994). In place of tracking, inclusion classes were popularized. Inclusion means that students of varying ability levels are placed together; also the courses are designed without labels like “honors”, “college prep” or “remedial.” The term “inclusion” refers to all students in the school. Although the term is popularly used in special education programs, the reasoning
remains to group students heterogeneously. While the terms “detracking” and “inclusion” are similar, detracking reforms actually led to the development of inclusion classes.

Due to the history and frequency of tracking, the attempts to detrack and provide inclusion classes to high school students were strenuous. Evidence shows the many problems with the existing structure of tracking. These problems encompass issues of race, gender, and social class, which all lead toward the present debate (Datnow, 2000; Oakes, 1985; Page, 1991). Additionally, justice issues related to tracking surfaced in the 1980s (Oakes, 1986).

First, racial injustice exists within the tracking system. From the 1930s through the 1970s African American students disproportionately outnumbered other students’ races in vocational education programs (Oakes, 1985). Next, in a study of 25 middle and high schools with tracked curricula, low ability groups contained much higher percentages of ethnic minorities than high ability groups, which were populated largely by whites (Hallinan, 1994; Oakes). Additionally, Iwanska (1979) suggested that curriculum designers (educational administrators) are not properly trained and end up supporting a curriculum model that poses cross-cultural problems.

The second problem with a tracked curricular model involves the issue of gender. One study examined the population of lower tracked classrooms and interactions between genders; it found that boys dominated lower tracked classes in numbers (Page, 1991). Teachers said that boys have more behavior problems and are poorer readers than girls. One teacher called her male-dominated classroom a scheduling glitch. The problem seen in this study was that girls in lower tracked classrooms had little or no chance to receive instruction (Page). Associated with the gender issue of tracking is the male-dominated school hierarchy. In an attempt to detrack one school’s curriculum, researchers uncovered that the “good ole boy” network resisted such
changes because male teachers did not value a change in curriculum design. Female educators agreed to detracking more often than male teachers did (Datnow, 2000).

A third supposition is that a tracked curriculum is faulty because it brings about prejudice based on social class. Oakes (1985) and Vanfossen et al. (1987) found that students of low socioeconomic class are disproportionately placed into lower tracked classes, offering those students little opportunity of social advancement later in life. Similarly, school leaders are pressured by the parents of white students to dismiss detracking in an effort to keep their children away from poor kids (Oakes, Wells, Yonezawa, & Ray, 2000). Additionally, privileged students and their parents, who typically exert a high degree of curricular influence, help thwart detracking efforts (Wells & Serna, 1996). These parents threaten to withdraw their students.

Between the lines, we see that some upper-class parents feel a sense of entitlement to choose teachers for their children and keep their children segregated from other groups. For example, in a court ordered desegregation plan, which detracked a school curriculum, a suburban high school shifted from all-white middle class to all black lower-class in ten years, while a neighboring principal kept an AP (Advanced Placement) program to prevent “white flight” (Oakes, Wells, et al., 2000). With this in mind, detracking the curriculum has unforeseen outcomes, especially if detracking is viewed as nonconsequential.

A final reason for detracking reform focused on the justice issues with tracking. While tracking may be viewed as a vehicle that encourages educational excellence by allowing students to match their ability level with instruction that maximizes their potential to learn, it is evident, rather, that tracking widens the educational gap rather than narrows it, which causes inequitable educational opportunities in school and later in life for students that are tracked (Oakes, 1986). Oakes (1996) and Gamoran (1987) found that students in the top tracks receive benefits from the
tracking system that students in the bottom tracks never realize, especially in regard to post secondary schooling and income potential. Additionally, the “greater good” within schools is commonly defined by a group of individuals (representing the highest track level) that competes for resources, which truly results in not maximizing the benefit of all others (Oakes, Quartz, Ryan, & Lipton, 2000). In relation to the justice point, Oakes (1985) said, “While there is certainly no automatic placement of poor and minority students in low tracks or of affluent white students in upper tracks, the odds of being assigned into particular tracks are not equal” (p. 64). The idea that the school curriculum system denies the poor and racial minority students the access to a good education is mirrored elsewhere (Shafer & Olexa, 1971).

Justice in track mobility is addressed as a reason to detrack the way that the curriculum is offered to students. Track mobility occurs when a student moves upward or downward to a different track in any subject. While overall track mobility occurs more often than people might expect, there are major discrepancies regarding who moves to lower tracks. If they move among tracks at all, females, African Americans, Latinos, students with lower grades, and students from low-SES families are most likely to move to a lower track, especially in junior or senior English and math classes (Hallinan, 1996; Lucas & Good, 2001).

To conclude the viewpoint that detracking should occur, we take a final step to recognize that the inequalities experienced through race, gender, and class present ethical issues about curriculum design. Additionally, justice issues regarding tracking have surfaced. In reality, the grouping of academically homogeneous students created disparity among other indicators. Race, gender, and socioeconomic status similarities among the levels of classes resulted from grouping students according to ability level.
A Neutral Account

In Slavin’s (1990) review of literature he found that the popular opinion within a tracked setting that high tracked student achievement rises and low tracked student achievement does not rise is not supported. Upheld is the belief that grouping versus no grouping has little effect on student achievement, which contradicts another view that states that grouping hinders learning (Oakes, 1985).

Several reasons help to explain why tracking is not the central issue in student achievement (Slavin, 1990). Firstly, the standardized tests used within the studies of the review do not pick up the effects of grouping. Secondly, it is suggested that the students in each tracked class do not influence another student’s performance. Thirdly, time on task and pace of instruction fluctuate in both homogeneous and heterogeneous class settings. Lastly, because the lecture style of instruction is the most implemented form used by teachers, the method of grouping becomes a minimal consideration when assessing student achievement. Slavin states, “Assigning students to different levels of the same course has no consistent positive or negative effect on students of high, average, or low ability” (p. 494).

Supported Use of Tracking from 1980s-Present

The amount of research available to refute tracking is nearly equal to the amount of research that supports tracking in schools (Agne, 1999; Gamoran & Berends, 1987; Lou et al., 1996; Loveless, 1999; Venezia & Kirst, 2005). Given this comparison, it is difficult to say overall whether tracking is good or bad. That conversation is not needed anyway, given the goals of the present study. Nonetheless, this redirection is intended to remind readers that research in tracking is as diverse as conversations about justice.
Effect of peers in tracked classes

Whether or not students in homogeneous (tracked) classes affect the learning of similar peers is the focus of at least one study (Zimmer, 2003). Zimmer looked at the effect of tracking on academic achievement, while holding constant the impact that peers may have on one another. The study is contextualized by the policy of tracking. Tracking occurs often in schools, so how should policy makers respond to those who say that tracking is inherently bad (Oakes, 1986)? One phrase needs explanation—peer effect. It refers to how students of similar ability level, whether high-ability or low-ability, impact one another’s learning in a homogeneously grouped setting such as tracking provides (Zimmer). The peer effect was then used to determine whether or not it impacts academic achievement. The effect of tracking on academic achievement was also addressed.

The results of this study were three-fold (Zimmer, 2003). In high-ability classes, tracking neither diminished nor enhanced the peer effect on student achievement. Tracking did not impact peers enough to have those peers impact others’ achievement. Also, in low-ability classes, the tracking curriculum system diminished achievement, and the peer effect was largely enhanced. Therefore, although the tracking system has a negative impact on student learning in low-tracked classes, it is countered by a stronger peer effect on learning, which creates a favorable outcome for student achievement in low-ability groups. Zimmer stated, “the negative effect from the mechanism of tracking …is countered by the positive effect of peers” (p. 311).

The implications of Zimmer’s (2003) study suggest that the tracking system can be an appropriate choice, especially for high achievers who are mostly unaffected by tracking and low achievers who benefit from tracking. Although tracking itself may pose problems for low achievers, tracking also positions like-minded students together who are likely to encourage
academic performance rather than hinder it or halt it altogether, as suggested by another researcher (Oakes, 1986). The implications of this study ultimately suggest that striking a balance among tracked classes is essential. A totally tracked school is less favored than a school that offers a variety of curricular options, yet tracking does assist many students (Zimmer).

Tracking and college preparation

Venezia and Kirst (2005) studied another area of tracking—whether students in different curricular tracks are prepared for college, including the understanding of college entrance policies. The study is based on a premise that students face conflicting signals when preparing for college. Expectations, admissions policies, and practices of colleges sometimes create a barrier for students to negotiate. These policies send signals to students about their likelihood to attend college (Venezia & Kirst).

The research was conducted on two levels. First, researchers in colleges and universities in six states were interviewed regarding state and institutional policies. Secondly, high schools of varying sizes and in close proximity to these universities were included. The high schools provided policies related to tracking, state level exams, and curricular options (Venezia & Kirst, 2005). Specifically, researchers examined 2,000 students in a variety of tracked classes. The results showed that high socio-economic status students and honors students were more prepared for college preparation activities than any other group. These same students looked down at community colleges and even made fun of them. Those students who were placed in honors and advanced placement courses received clearer signals about college admission than lower tracked peers. To correct these issues, the researchers called for teachers in all tracks to play a bigger role in providing college admissions policies to students, only if schools would provide that
information to teachers. Guidance counselors were viewed as ineffective to deal with these issues because teachers see the students more regularly and are familiar with them.

Furthermore, the researchers found that students in all curricular tracks can be prepared for college if local schools provide admissions information that teachers can disseminate in class. In relation to tracking, the study does not suggest avoiding a tracked curriculum. Rather, schools should create policies that align general education courses with college admissions procedures and academics needed in post-secondary schooling (Venezia & Kirst, 2005).

In an earlier, related study it was found that the mechanism of tracking influences students’ college attendance; however, the perception of their track level did not influence college plans (Rosenbaum, 1980). Simply stated, the way that tracking works in schools leads students toward or away from college access. However, students’ inaccuracies of their track location, coupled with what others think about another person’s track level, do not make a significant impact on later college choices (Rosenbaum).

**Shifting the blame**

Tracking has also been excused from problems that originally surfaced in tracking research. While tracking originally took the blame for negative student attitudes in tracked classes, it was later conceived that student attitudes differed prior to any track placement (Gamoran & Berends, 1987). Equally as powerful, whereas previous research had shown the racial and social inequities of the tracked system (Oakes, 1985), others argue that tracking has nothing to do with race (Agne, 1999; Loveless, 1999). That minority students and economically disadvantaged students are placed in lower tracks is not systematic but as a result of low grades and test scores (Loveless).
Another shift is the effect that tracking has on student self-concepts and behavior, namely the likelihood that tracking causes low self-esteem and delinquency in the male population. If delinquency is a result of tracking then it could be hypothesized that students in tracked courses are not satisfied with the curriculum and revolt against the school’s system. Wiatrowski, Hansell, Massey, and Wilson (1982) examined 1600 tracked high school boys representative of a national sample in a longitudinal study. Interview and survey instruments identified skills, ability level, values, future plans, and a self-assessment of delinquency behavior. A theoretical model and self-esteem index were used to provide demographic information for each track level. The independent variable of track placement was causally compared to delinquency, which served as the dependent variable.

Wiatrowski et al. (1982) found that the tracked curriculum did not affect delinquency behaviors when prior delinquency levels were controlled. The data also indicated that in a follow-up questionnaire, 87% of the students were satisfied with the curriculum. The study examined only males, so a limitation is the transfer of tracking and delinquency to females.

Some studies focused too much on group differences in tracking, which masked the individual differences within groups (Boaler, Wiliam, & Brown, 2000). Also, whereas Oakes argued for detracking in the 1980s, the reality is that mainly private schools with class sizes at about twelve students per teacher were able to detrack (Greenbaum, Ljung, & Johnson, 1990). The suggestion is that detracking is impractical (if not impossible) because public school classrooms regularly house 30 students per teacher.

A different form of tracking

Within-class grouping occurs when a single classroom is divided into learning groups. The learning groups may be homogeneous or heterogeneous, based on interests, ability, or other
factors. While within-class grouping is not the same as tracking (where the grouping occurs between each class rather than within it), the arguments about within-class grouping apply to tracking (Lou et al., 1996). In a meta-analysis of 72 studies, it was quantitatively concluded that homogeneous ability grouping is favored more than heterogeneous ability grouping (Lou et al.). Included was the belief that class size and amount of teacher materials are important components to any grouping procedure.

Student achievement

Historically, students in tracked classes only slightly outperformed students who were not tracked (Kulik & Kulik, 1982). In regard to student achievement, tracking assists high ability learners, hinders low ability learners, and does not significantly affect middle ability learners (Hallinan, 1996). However, when including the influence that homogeneously grouped peers have on achievement, tracking has favorable student outcomes (Zimmer, 2003).

Similarly, deconstructing tracking would probably benefit students in lower groups while simultaneously hurting students in the upper groups (Argys, Rees & Brewer, 1996; Kulik & Kulik, 1982). However, when additional materials and resources, such as teacher aides, are provided to teachers in low tracked classes, those students also experience increased achievement (Hallinan, 1994). Furthermore, the student-to-teacher ratio in tracked classes and level of teacher education affects student achievement (Argys et al.).

Grouping students by ability level allows the greatest depth of learning to occur. Motivation and pace of instruction increase in tracked classes (Agne, 1999). In fact, Gamoran and Mare (1989) found that track differences in math achievement and high school graduation rates had to do with preexisting differences among students—not with the track system singularly.
Teacher Impact

Teachers who care about their students impact learning more than any other factor. “Caring teachers believe in each student’s ability to achieve and shape the teaching-learning process by placing the learning at the center” (Lumpkin, 2007, p. 160). A teacher’s role in the learning process is a powerful one (O’Shea, 2006), and when a caring attitude is included in a teacher’s repertoire, then learning occurs (Noddings, 1992). Rubie-Davies (2006) found a strong connection between teacher expectations and student self-perceptions. When teachers expect a lot from students as a whole class, the students believe more strongly in their own abilities. Whether looking at teacher impact from an individual or class lens, the teacher’s role complements student success in the classroom.

Behind the Scenes

This section thus far has shown the positive and negative sides of tracking. Many of the issues highlighted here happen secondarily to the track system of education. When some studies discuss tracking results, in either positive or negative lights, they also mention the other factors that contributed to a study’s findings (Hallinan, 1994). While the amount of research on the effects of tracking is obvious, it behooves this conversation to turn toward the student opinion of tracking.

Student Experiences in Tracking

Turning toward how students respond to tracking is necessary. The students are the people who are directly involved in the tracking experience, so their reflections and thoughts are a very important aspect of tracking as a whole. This section discusses tracking in regard to student satisfaction, self concept, attitudes, and perceptions of the system. Ultimately, including
student voice in discussions about tracking captures a perspective that is unknown to adult researchers (Yonezawa & Jones, 2006).

**Satisfaction**

Combining tracking as an independent variable and satisfaction as one of many dependent variables occurred in a study that examined the effects of tracking over three years on high school students who stayed in the same curricular track (Vanfossen et al., 1987). An existing data set called High School and Beyond is a two-stage stratified probability sample, where first 1100 schools were selected, and second, 36 sophomores and seniors from each school were selected for the sample. Standard multiple regression analyzed all variables. Satisfaction was measured through responses to how students’ education was going and their interest in school; the means of sophomore and senior year satisfaction were compared. For students enrolled in upper track levels, satisfaction increased. General-tracked students’ satisfaction did not change. Satisfaction among vocational-tracked students’ declined, mostly due to interest in school and relevance of school to life (Vanfossen et al.).

To reinvestigate the delinquency point made earlier, evidence indicates that tracking does not affect delinquency rates, so it was concluded that students in tracked classes are satisfied with their curriculum (Wiatrowski et al., 1982). Gifted students perceive their curricular track as complementary to their academic pursuits; that is, their academic ability grows with the effort required of them in a gifted program (Feldhusen & Dai, 1997).

**Self Concept and Friendships**

According to a couple research studies, ability grouping produces a positive effect on self-concept, but the effect is only minor (Kulik & Kulik, 1982; Vanfossen et al., 1987). Agne (1999) states that when students are grouped heterogeneously, the low achievers do not
participate for fear of giving a wrong answer; however, in homogeneously grouped classes these same students feel more comfortable with like-minded peers. Gifted students do not see their academic programming as influencing their relationships with peers who are not gifted (Feldhusen & Dai, 1997). This suggests that a high tracked student is still comfortable enough with him or her self to forge relationships with classmates of any track level. However, in regard to making friends, track placement encourages students to forge friendships with others in their own track (Kubitschek & Hallinan, 1998) because these students are together in various courses.

Attitude toward Subject Matter and School

According to Kulik and Kulik (1982) English and math students who are ability-grouped tend to have better attitudes toward the subject matter than non-grouped students. There is little difference in overall attitude toward school when ability-grouped and non-grouped students are compared (Kulik & Kulik, 1982). In a more recent study, ability grouping could not be blamed for causing a negative impact on student attitudes toward school or themselves (Shields, 2002). Lastly, while students’ attitudes are different among track levels, those attitude differences likely occur before (or separate from) track placement (Gamoran & Berends, 1987).

Perception of the Tracking System

While boys generally favor tracking and girls generally oppose it, girls may feel more strongly about their opinion (Sweet & Nuttall, 1971). Furthermore, students in the lowest and highest tracks have negative attitudes toward tracking while students in the average track level favor tracking, which yields a sense of satisfaction for middle-of-the-road learners (Sweet & Nuttall).

Data collected from students in two urban high schools revealed that students saw their track placement as arbitrary (Yonezawa & Jones, 2006). They responded that the track system
had more to do with scheduling than meeting their needs as students. These same students reported that tracking results in an inequitable system by placing low achieving students in tracked courses that have “less rigorous and engaging teachers and curriculum” (Yonezawa & Jones, p. 18). Teachers in tracked classes most often support tracking because of increased time on task and being able to reach students with similar learning abilities (Loveless, 1999).

Summary

The history of justice and the most contemporary view called the ethic of justice have been explained. The history of tracking, explanation of the detracking movement, and supports for tracking today are included. Likewise, student response to tracking has been examined.

Because of the conceptual framework and need for further investigation about tracking, the purpose of the present study is to let the student response to tracking emerge. Those responses will reveal what influence tracking had on the whole high school experience and help to identify the justice of the tracking system.
CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the phenomenological approach to qualitative research. I examine characteristics of phenomenology and the role of the researcher. Next, I explain the context of the present study, including how I selected participants. The methods section includes interview procedures, instrumentation, data collection, and analysis. To conclude this chapter, issues related to ensuring validity are explained.

Research Questions

In order to capture the student responses to a tracked curriculum and their relationship with the ethic of justice, the following research questions were addressed:

1. How do 12th grade students describe their experience in tracked classes in high school?
2. How does the essence of tracking impact 12th graders’ high school experiences?
3. How are students’ tracking experiences represented on the ethic of justice spectrum?

The Phenomenological Approach

Phenomenology is one branch on the qualitative tree of research methods. Initiated by Edmund Hüsserl at the turn of the twentieth century, he believed that a phenomenon could be studied through the eyes of several people who have experienced the phenomenon (1931, as cited in Moustakas, 1994). Those lived experiences lead toward an overall meaning or essence. The phenomenon of interest in this study was tracking.

Qualities of Phenomenology

The ultimate purpose of a phenomenological study is to uncover the essence about something. Essence is defined as the meaning of a collection of experiences (van Manen, 2002a). Phenomenology helps to awaken the experiences of participants through interviews and
conversations (Kvale, 1996). The researcher borrows the participants’ words and thoughts. These experiences, taken as a whole, then produce the essence. Essence is uncovered through rigorous reflection and understanding of the experiences (Moustakas, 1994) and emerges once data are coded into themes and analyzed (Probert, 2006).

For my study, a phenomenology of practice served as the primary orientation (van Manen, 2002a). Here, phenomenology was used within an applied or professional context such as education. The goal of my study was to provide a vehicle (interviews with students) through which the essence of tracking would emerge. By starting with what I know and have experienced about tracking, setting it aside, and learning a new view from six participants, a better sense of tracking was developed.

My use of phenomenology was appropriate for the school context. Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004) used phenomenology of practice to uncover the meaning associated with mentoring programs. The mentoring took place in educational, counseling, and medical contexts, and the use of a predetermined design (phenomenology) helped to explain how mentoring was a shared activity that benefited both sides of the mentoring arrangement, even though the mentors only intended to help the other person. As an example, this 2004 study showed that a collection of experiences with a phenomenon (mentoring) resulted in a bigger picture—the essence of these experiences as a whole. Phenomenology revealed the symbiotic relationship within mentoring.

Époche

In phenomenology, the focus is on a phenomenon. The end goal is to talk about the experiences individuals have with a phenomenon to uncover an overall essence. In my role as a researcher I borrowed the experiences of students who have been tracked throughout high school
to better understand what was happening inside the tracked curriculum. “Borrowing” refers to teasing out a collection of tracking experiences that later, when looked at as a whole, creates the overall essence of tracking. In a phenomenological study the end product is a discussion about the phenomenon, not the participants (van Manen, 2002a).

A researcher who has some personal history with the phenomenon has to set those experiences aside. Known as Époche, or bracketing, the researcher’s beliefs are suspended by detailing them in advance (Moustakas, 1994; Probert, 2006). This helps to intentionally set aside any *a priori* assumptions about the phenomenon. As van Manen (2002b) states, Époche is “a ‘bracketing’ of the ‘natural attitude’ so that one can attend to a phenomenon as it shows itself” (p. 7). Before collecting any data from students, I needed to become aware of and document my experiences about tracking.

**Bracketing**

As a high school student, I was cognizant of my track placement. I was a middle-of-the-road learner. The college preparatory track contained the most students in my grade level, while the honors and general education tracks flanked my group with the smallest class numbers. I did not think much about my track placement; it was just sort of there. Upon entrance into college, some discussions about tracking took place. It was then that I realized how the college prep track in one school could contain learners similar to the honors track in another school. I discovered by accident that tracks were comprised of different learners, depending upon the school’s location, size, and community features.

When I became a high school teacher, I taught tenth grade English students in a rural community. In grades 9-10 English classes, there were no tracks. The classes were mainstreamed and included the whole range of learners. However, in grades 11-12 there was
one honors class for each grade level. In the same school, math classes were tracked in grades 9-12. After attempting to meet the needs of all learners in my English class (as a first year teacher), I lobbied for and received permission to open an honors class for sophomores the following year. This shows my experience of tracking from a teacher’s perspective—that meeting students’ needs in a mainstreamed class (at least in English) is nearly an impossible task, especially for higher achievers.

After three years in that school, I changed jobs and taught English for seven years in a suburban community of mostly middle and upper middle class families. In grades 9-12 English classes, there were three tracks that contained honors, college prep, and general education students. While the content for each track was similar, the depth of study and expectations of students were much different. At that school, I taught General English 12, English 10 College Prep, Honors English 10 and also a co-taught General English 9 course.

Set into stone was my belief that tracked students are much easier and more interesting to teach than mainstreamed students. Due to a common ability level, less time was needed to prepare for instruction, which resulted in more time available to explore future lessons and grade papers. I found myself investigating alternative assessments and student-centered activities, so due to tracking, my approach to teaching changed. This resulted in students who appreciated spending time in class doing unusual but useful activities that they, sometimes, chose. Tracked students viewed me more as a classroom coach than an instructor. Seven years later, I saw tracking as beneficial to students and teachers.

Comparing each track revealed similarities and differences. The general education students I taught were quite comfortable in their spot. They knew their place in the grand scheme of tracking and embraced it. Most students were friends outside of the classroom and
oftentimes lived in similar neighborhoods. The honors students typically had other classes
together, especially in music and math—due to scheduling issues. Most of the time, the honors
students had knitted tight friendships within the group. However, in the college prep classes,
students were not cohesive. The classes contained a wide range of ability levels including some
students who should have been placed in either the general or honors tracks. It appeared obvious
to me that the middle-of-the-roaders (which included me in high school) viewed their group as
undistinguishable.

Other factors played a role in setting my perspective about tracking. I had completed a
Master’s thesis about learning strategies, namely reciprocal teaching, which reinforced my
assumptions about tracking. Also, I attained my Principal License (Grades 4-12) and Curriculum
& Instruction License at the district level. Furthermore, my beliefs were challenged when I
started a doctoral degree program and began researching tracking. As I encountered the articles
and studies that supported or vehemently refuted my own thoughts about tracking, the need for
the present study became apparent. My motivation for this study ultimately derives from
watching students that I taught in tracked classes.

Based on my experiences, I suspected to hear a few things in the student interviews. I
guessed that the students in the highest and lowest tracks were happy with their track placement.
I thought that the middle tracked students’ responses would be quite neutral, with no strong
feelings for or against tracking. In regard to the ethic of justice, I thought that the responses
would generally fall toward the utilitarian side of the justice spectrum, thus supporting that
students view tracking as something that serves the greater good in schools. In regard to the
overall student experience in high school, I do not think that tracking plays a major role.
By writing down these experiences in advance, I became aware of my prior beliefs about tracking. Thus, when the interviews began and I asked about student experiences in tracking, I was more open to what students said, and more aware of the need to probe for more details. Data analysis was based primarily on student responses that later became informed by my previously held opinions; this is described later in the chapter.

Community Context and its High School

The suburban community is located ten miles from the fourth largest city in a Midwestern state. Nineteen thousand citizens live within the suburb’s city limits, and the surrounding township adds approximately 14,000 more people. The community houses its own police and fire divisions, along with other services typically found in communities of its size. While the community has grown tremendously, its citizens have historically backed the schools financially. Local levies, although at times contentious, end up getting community support eventually. Other facilities such as for transportation are mostly up-to-date.

In 2006-07, the school district had a total enrollment of 4,500 students in six school buildings—four elementary schools, a junior high school that houses grades 6-8, and a senior high school. The state awarded the district the highest rating of Excellent on its state report card, achieving all indicators for many years in a row.

The high school, which serves grades 9-12 and includes 3 principals, about 80 teachers and 1,500 students, has employed tracking for many years. The track system is different for most subject areas yet includes most special needs students in any track level, including honors, even though there are separate self-contained areas for students with the most severe disabilities.

In science and social studies courses, most students are placed into classes that include everyone, regardless of college plans or ability level. However, in those content areas, there are
also honors and advanced placement courses, especially at the 11th and 12th grade levels.

Furthermore in science, there are differences among which classes the students take; the most academically achieving students enroll in chemistry, microbiology, and anatomy whereas their counterparts take physical science, earth science or even transitional science. While there is no set track for students to follow, there exist prerequisites (mainly grades earned in previous courses) that determine later course selections.

The track design in math is much different. In math, a low ability student takes in succession the courses of transitions (pre-algebra) math, Algebra 1, and geometry. The middle ability student takes Algebra 1, geometry, and Algebra 2. High ability students, who took Algebra 1 as 8th graders, enroll in Honors Geometry, Honors Algebra 2, Trigonometry/Pre-Calculus, and, as seniors, a statistics course. The tracks in math were made by course selection at each grade level, rather than, for example, hosting multiple levels of the same course in each grade.

The track system was also obvious in English classes. At each grade level, there were three choices: general, college prep or honors English. In grade 12, the honors course was split by an Advanced Placement option for honors students who wished to read extensively during the summer and attend an out-of-country field trip, which resulted in fund raising requirements too. Most special needs students (defined here as a student with a disability on an Individualized Education Plan, or IEP) were enrolled into any of the three tracks in English, while the remaining students attend a self-contained area. The prerequisite for the honors program included scoring in the top percentage of the class on a placement test given each spring and teacher recommendation. Parents successfully (but rarely) managed to bypass this process because any
student was entitled to enroll in any class at the school, a practice sometimes upheld by administrators and mostly detested by honors teachers.

When English and math tracks were compared, some difficulties initially emerged. The respective tracks of students enrolled in the same courses, but with more deviations than anticipated. Students in general English also took the same strand in math—ending with geometry their junior year. College prep students in English take the same courses in math—typically ending with algebra 2 their junior year. However, many honors English students were not honors math students. Additionally, I discovered that students changed track levels at times. For the purpose of this study, the participant selection included only seniors who were on the same track in English and math throughout high school.

Methods

This section describes the participant selection process. Issues related to the participant criteria are given. Interview Protocol is explained. Data collection and analysis are also included.

Participant Selection

In order to collect useful data, I employed a criterion sampling strategy. Phenomenology requires that all participants experience the phenomenon, so criterion sampling is appropriate for a phenomenological study (Creswell, 1998). In my study, the criterion started with students from each track (general, college prep, and honors) in English and math who have stayed on the same track throughout high school. Additionally, students were required to be seniors, 18 years old, and graduating the same year the study took place.

The program Data for Student Learning (DSL) was used to identify the students who met the criteria. Of those students, I then had to decide how to come up with the six participants for
the study. Two students from each of the three main track levels would be interviewed, so as to capture tracking as a whole. My goal was not to capture three different essences of tracking but rather to capture three components of one essence. I am not comparing track levels; I am exploring one overarching track system that was implemented at the high school.

Therefore, given the list of students who met the criteria, the names were put into three groups that corresponded to track level. The first two people in each track level who agreed to participate were selected and included in the study. While the idea of interviewing students who are able to talk about their experiences and who communicate effectively is suggested (Moustakas, 1994), I preferred a random selection from the criterion list to allow for student voice to emerge naturally.

I was initially surprised at the limited numbers of students in some tracks who met the study’s criteria. In the low ability track, only three students met the criteria. I discovered that many low tracked seniors had tried the middle track their junior year, having been in the low track their freshman and sophomore years. Another large group of students who had been in the low track their first two years transferred to vocational school. Other students were not graduating on time. Fortunately, the first two students I asked to participate agreed.

There were over one hundred middle track students who met the criteria. For the honors track, there were 15 students who qualified. Overall, I realized that the highest and lowest tracked students in English and math for all four years of high school were low in numbers. Some four-year honors English students were not honors math students or vice versa. Other near-qualifiers for the study were not in the school for all four years.

In a face-to-face meeting I began to ask students individually if they were interested in participation. I briefly told the student about my research study and the stages of their
involvement. Once they orally agreed to be included, students read and signed a Letter of Consent (See Appendix A). Overall, students were interested in participating. Only one student who was middle tracked declined participation. In order to schedule interview times, I had printed out each student’s schedule of courses and identified study hall times, late arrivals, and early dismissals.

*Interview Protocol*

To properly answer the first research question, which asks how students describe their tracking experience, I broke down tracking into various subtopics. Known as thematizing, (Kvale, 1996) the *why* and *what* of tracking was gauged. Those subtopics included satisfaction with school, discussion of tracking with peers, amount of homework, perceptions of own track and tracks of others, perception of teachers, preparation for future learning (college or job training), and future plans (Boaler et al., 2000; Feldhusen & Dai, 1997; Shields, 2002; Vanfossen et al., 1987; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006). A list of the first round interview questions appears in Appendix B.

While an interviewer in a phenomenological study must prepare questions in advance, it is also permissible to ask follow-up questions as the interview unfolds because a conversational tone and open-ended questions help to expose the intricacies of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Some of my peers helped to develop the questions (Kvale, 1996). The questions were peer reviewed and revised before I conducted the interviews to ensure that the interview questions would extract answers to the research questions. The use of peer review (See Appendix C) is fully covered in the validity section of this chapter. Two rounds of interviews took place. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. Upon completion of the first
interview round, interview questions for the second round (See Appendix D) were written using
the same process as described above.

The main difference between interview rounds was that the first round contained the
lighter, overarching content of tracking. Once the data was coded from the first round, those
themes or areas that emerged most often were further discussed in the second round. Therefore,
the interview questions for round two were created based on the student responses from round
one.

*Data Collection and Analysis*

I used the Modifications of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis of
Phenomenological Data to analyze and code the data (Moustakas, 1994). In turn, the
interviewees described their own experience of the phenomenon through answering the interview
questions and being given time to just talk about their experiences. The digitally recorded
interviews were transcribed. Each nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statement was listed and later
the full set of statements was clustered into themes.

The themes emerged as the *texture* (what the participants said) of the experience. The
textures included verbatim examples from the interviews. Then, given my own experiences with
the phenomenon (which was set aside earlier using the process known as Époche), imaginative
variation shaped the *structures* of the experience. Taken together, the textural-structural
descriptions revealed the essence of the phenomenon for the interviewees and researcher as a
whole.

Imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994) includes four steps:

1. Systematic varying of the possible structural meanings that underlie the textural
   meanings;
2. Recognizing the underlying themes or contexts that account for the emergence of the phenomenon;

3. Considering the universal structures that precipitate feelings and thoughts with reference to the phenomenon, such as the structure of time, space, bodily concerns, materiality, causality, relation to self, or relation to others;

4. Searching for exemplifications that vividly illustrate the invariant structural themes and facilitate the development of a structural description of the phenomenon. (p. 99)

Wolcott (1994) explained that the purpose of a phenomenology could be reached if three activities to transform qualitative data are included. He explained data description, data analysis, and data interpretation to be appropriate in phenomenological study. While Moustakas’ (1994) ideas served as the primary method of data collection and analysis, Wolcott’s ideas complement the overall discussion of qualitative research and are evident in Moustakas’ model. Data transformation, in Wolcott’s view, essentially moves raw data into the story that needs to be shared. Moustakas gives the specific steps to make it possible. The organization that I followed is explained below.

I. Interview Round One. Two students representing each of the three track levels were interviewed before moving on to Round Two. The interviews were audio recorded. After each interview was completed, interviews were transcribed. Once the transcripts were completed, they were coded by general themes (Moustakas, 1994). I kept a codebook to define the boundaries for each code (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Upon completing the coding process, a statement list was created to organize all participant statements by code. The statement list was given to a peer reviewer. (Peer review is discussed fully in the credibility and trustworthiness section). The
peer reviewer provided an independent interpretation of the themes that were then compared to my findings. Lastly, I planned for the second round of interviews, and new interview questions were created.

II. Interview Round Two takes place. The same process as round one occurred.

III. Data Interpretation. Here, all results were interpreted. The interpretation generated a description and essence of the tracking phenomenon to answer the first two research questions. I then attempted to place student responses within the ethic of justice spectrum (Starratt, 1991) to answer the third research question that asks where student responses to tracking fall in relation to justice. As a third meeting with participants, I individually shared the findings to see how they responded to the themes and essence I had captured. Member checking will be fully explained in the validity section.

Throughout the entire data collection process, I engaged in analysis notes, memoing, and informal journaling activities (Maxwell, 2005).

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Research activities undertaken to increase the likelihood of valid results in a phenomenological study are covered in this section. The use of triangulation of participants, peer review, and member checking are explained. To conclude the section, the overall goals of the research activities are examined.

Triangulation of Participants

One research activity aimed at increasing credibility is triangulation (Creswell, 1998; Maxwell, 2005). Triangulation can take different forms. First, a triangulation of sources would mean collecting data through multiple methods such as interviews, surveys, and observations. A
second form of triangulation employed in my research study is triangulation of participants. The participants represented each of the three track levels in the school in English and math. Therefore, I interviewed two honors students, two college prep students, and two general education students.

As stated in the Participant Selection section, my goal was to capture three components of one essence. Therefore the track identity for each participant was intentionally taken away once coding began. Including all three tracks in the study encouraged the generation of one well-investigated essence more plausible. Additionally, the transferability (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002) of my study to other schools that have three track levels in English and math classes, which is a common practice, is more likely.

Peer Review

Another research activity geared toward gaining credibility is peer review (Creswell, 1998; Maxwell, 2005), and it takes place on two levels. First, after I wrote the interview questions, I asked another peer to review the questions. She helped to assess whether or not the questions would accurately get answers to my research questions. The peer reviewer was a current teacher of tracked classes and held a Master’s Degree. The methodologist of my dissertation committee also evaluated the interview questions.

Secondly, peer review of the statement lists occurred. In phenomenology the peer reviewer should be a person who is familiar with the phenomenon being studied. That reviewer is an expert on the topic and can then intelligently contribute her own analysis of the data. Once the peer reviewer had independently recoded the data, the results were compared with the primary researcher’s findings. In my study, the peer reviewer was a teacher at the school where my participants attended but not one of participants’ current teachers. The teacher taught in
tracked classes for 15 years, has taught each track level in her subject and was obviously familiar with the same context as the participants. She was current on trends in education and committed some of her free time to reading current educational literature.

**Member Checking**

The final research activity implemented to increase credibility was member checks (Creswell, 1998; Maxwell, 2005). Member checking occurred after the researcher had transcribed and analyzed the data and completed the peer review process. Once done, the participants were given copies of the analyses to ensure that their experiences of the phenomenon had been accurately recorded and described (Glesne, 2006). I gauged their reactions to see if they agreed or disagreed. In my study, I employed member checking after both interview rounds were completed.

Together, the research activities accomplished a similar goal. Triangulation, peer review, and member checks helped to ensure that the researcher’s conclusions were good ones. The activities solidified that the conclusions reached in the study were indeed the case—not just from the researcher’s point-of-view—but also in the minds of participants and peer reviewers.

The trustworthiness of a study is determined by the quality of data, a rigorous analysis process, and appropriate thematizing of the data (Maxwell, 2005). Sometimes included within the umbrella of trustworthiness are terms such as transferability or confirmability (Morse et al., 2002). Transferability refers to the results likely appearing the same way in a school with similar structure or in this case located in a similar community. Confirmability occurs when the meanings that emerged from the data are plausible and sturdy (Miles & Huberman, 1994).
Summary

The experiences of six students helped to capture the essence of tracking in the high school setting. Using phenomenological procedures assisted me in getting answers to my research questions. Another goal was to provide a way for students to contribute to a discussion about ethics and tracking.
CHAPTER IV. DATA TRANSFORMATION

Data collection and analysis are closely intertwined. This chapter explains the specific processes implemented to transform the data from two rounds of interviews. They include creating statement lists, assigning codes, and sorting codes together using Microsoft Excel. Then, the use of peer review is captured as a way to further transform the data. The initial theming and member checking experiences will be discussed. CHAPTER 4 ultimately explains the intricacies involved in dissecting the large quantity of data expected from a phenomenological study.

Round One Interview Analysis

After transcribing the six round one interviews, the first task was to create a statement list (Moustakas, 1994). The six transcriptions were placed into one document. The interview questions and my own comments were removed, thus leaving only the participants’ dialogue in paragraph form. Then, starting at the beginning of this document, I separated all sentences so that each one began on its own line. These individual sentences are also known as statements. The result was one very long document (the statement list) that contained all participants’ statements. I was ready to begin coding each statement.

Code Assignment

I began to assign codes by looking at each statement and labeling it with a specific term that best captured the statement’s content such as “fairness” for example. I simultaneously created the original code list, and with a simple checkmark I inscribed each statement with the respective colored pencil or highlighter. I ran out of colors, so I began to use symbols with colors to pair the codes and statements. Nonetheless, the statement list was coded, and the original code list was created.
Once the code list was completed, an alphabetical letter was assigned to each code in a very specific manner (See Table 1). As I looked at each code, I began to think about how some codes were related. I wanted to place related codes next to one another. Therefore, instead of “running down the list” and assigning “A, B, C…”, I “bounced around” and intentionally assigned letters to codes. At times, I realized new code relationships but was already too far into the alphabet to erase and redo. So, double letters (such as BB and EE) were used to improve the letter assignments because I knew that once sorting began the same individual and double letter combinations (B, BB or E, EE) would be placed together. Looking at Table 1 will highlight some examples. All math issues (codes O through T) are chunked together. Also, school social life (E) and friends (EE) would eventually end up side-by-side through the electronic sorting process.
Table 1

*Original Code List*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>Academics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>Wealth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-</td>
<td>Course selection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D-</td>
<td>Experience and extracurriculars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-</td>
<td>School social life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-</td>
<td>Good teachers/liked class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G-</td>
<td>Bad teachers/disliked class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H-</td>
<td>Tough class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I-</td>
<td>Teacher personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J-</td>
<td>English assignments/home work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-</td>
<td>Time spent on English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L-</td>
<td>English tough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M-</td>
<td>English easy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N-</td>
<td>English rating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O-</td>
<td>Math assignments/homework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-</td>
<td>Time spent on Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q-</td>
<td>Math tough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-</td>
<td>Math easy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S-</td>
<td>Math rating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T-</td>
<td>Math concepts build over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U-</td>
<td>College application and plans for college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V-</td>
<td>Future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W-</td>
<td>Own perception of other tracks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X-</td>
<td>Own perception of own track</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y-</td>
<td>Other’s perception of tracks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z-</td>
<td>Discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BB-</td>
<td>Stereotypes in the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC-</td>
<td>Fairness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EE-</td>
<td>Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GG-</td>
<td>Student effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II-</td>
<td>Teacher expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TT-</td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UU-</td>
<td>Academic preparation for college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZZ-</td>
<td>Personal view</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After assigning letters to each code, I went back to the statement list and handwrote the appropriate letter(s) next to each coded statement. As a final step, I typed the letter(s) at the front of each statement. Doing so provided a method for digitally sorting the data by code.

**Sorting Method**

The full statement list with code assignments was copied and pasted into an Excel spreadsheet and sorted alphabetically. Since each statement began with a code letter, this sorting technique placed all codes together. Double letters followed single letters, such as “e, ee and u, uu”. This refined spreadsheet was then copied and pasted back into a Microsoft Word document. However, the spreadsheet was automatically turned into table form in the document. Therefore, within Microsoft Word, I converted the table back into text.

This sorting technique achieved another important goal. It removed many track identifiers for each participant. No longer did I know which participant said which comment. Before sorting, the statement list placed a participant’s statements altogether. The sorting method placed statements together according to code. While content sometimes revealed that a particular track member said a statement, the sorting process essentially grouped ideas by code. This eventually accomplished revealing the overall essence of tracking rather than individual track essences. I retained individual interview transcripts and referred back to them for the context in which participants made individual statements. Plus, the interview transcripts were valuable resources for directly quoting the participants.

Next, the sorted and coded statement list was then reorganized. All statements for each code were placed onto their own page. I quickly discovered that the codes varied in the intensity of statements. Some codes contained only a few statements, whereas other codes contained statements that extended longer than a full page. I needed to refine some of the codes that
appeared too broad before the second interview because I felt that I had some unrefined data. Sometimes when coding is completed it is necessary to recode those areas that may reveal something more. To refine some codes, I enlisted the aid of my peer reviewer.

**Peer Review**

I gave my peer reviewer a copy of the coded statement list and code descriptions. She examined the statement list and gave particular attention to those codes that contained the most statements. In doing so, she was able to critique my coding attempt and simultaneously refine the large codes more specifically. The peer review process teased out and got a better handle on what appeared within each of the largest codes. Too much happened in the first interview that required further investigation in the second interview.

The end result of peer review was a five-page typed document that she created to clarify what I had missed in my coding attempt (see Appendix C). For each of the largest codes, she created a bulleted list. She more specifically captured what was happening within those codes. Valuable, new information emerged. The coded data had been reduced to more manageable chunks. My peer reviewer and I got together for a long conversation about it all. The biggest benefit from the peer reviewer’s critique was realized as I began to write second round interview questions because the large codes had been dissected, which led to more specific interview questions. Peer review assisted me in honing in on those topics most apparent in participants’ tracking experiences.

*Preparing for the Second Round of Interviews*

My peer reviewer and dissertation committee members contributed to creating and refining interview questions for the second round. The content for the questions emerged from the content of the first round participants’ responses. Some of the largest codes had already been
refined, so we created questions to further investigate specific areas such as “student effort” and “extracurricular activities”. I ultimately hoped that the second set of interview questions would produce more specific information about those first codes that required further investigation while also gaining further depth about some original codes that revealed interesting, relevant insights into the high school experience, essence of tracking, and justice of tracking. Keeping this viewpoint at the forefront forced me to always consider the study’s three research questions. See Appendix D for the second round interview questions.

Some timing issues were important. I was fortunate to have interested, available participants. Each interview round was conducted in one week. The transcription process took less time than anticipated. Also, meetings with my peer reviewer and some committee members took place in a timely manner. These factors sped up the data collection process.

Round Two Interview Analysis

I found myself becoming more involved in the interview rather than relying on the prepared questions. The rapport that I had built with participants early on made this open-ended interview style possible. It resulted in what my dissertation advisor called, “trustworthiness of data is a rapport issue” after reading some interview transcripts.

Code Assignment

The same round one processes of transcription, creating statement lists, and sorting were repeated in round two, independent of the Round One data. However, in keeping with the data analysis method discussed in CHAPTER 3 (Moustakas, 1994), some code assignments from round one were reused, whereas new codes were allowed to emerge. Also, since the second interviews were intended to further delve into issues that previously emerged, the original codes were separated into multiple new codes. See Table 2 for the list of revised codes. I modified the
way that I assigned each statement a code. Rather than handwriting the code letter on the statement list, I went directly to the statement document and typed them in. This saved one step in the process and slightly differs from the steps I completed in the round one interview analysis.

Table 2

Revised Code List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A: Academics/GPA</th>
<th>K: Importance of variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B: Cliques and stereotypes</td>
<td>L: Grade level difficulty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C: Experience and extracurriculars</td>
<td>M: Grade level enjoyment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D: Friends</td>
<td>N: Leadership/principal roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E: Neighborhood/upbringing influence</td>
<td>O: Pace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F: Student effort</td>
<td>P: Applications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G: Teacher personality</td>
<td>Q: Academic preparation for college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H: Teacher expectations</td>
<td>R: Guidance counselors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I: English based on reading</td>
<td>S: Track assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J: Types of Instruction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To show the thinking behind code revisions, I’ll demonstrate how the code transformation occurred. In Table 3, the revised codes appear on the left, and the original codes that comprised the revised codes appear on the right.
Table 3

*Final Codes That Encompassed Codes from the Original List*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Final Codes</th>
<th>Original Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academics/GPA</td>
<td>Academics, Course selection,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cliques and stereotypes</td>
<td>Wealth, Other’s perception of tracks, Stereotypes in the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience and extracurriculars</td>
<td>Experience and extracurriculars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>School social life, Discussions, Friends, Personal view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood/upbringing influence</td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student effort</td>
<td>Tough class, English tough, English easy, Math tough, Math easy, Student effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher personality</td>
<td>Good teachers/liked class, Bad teachers/disliked Class, Teacher personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher expectations</td>
<td>Math rating, Math concepts build over time, Teacher expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English based on reading</td>
<td>English rating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of Instruction</td>
<td>English assignments/homework, Math assignments/homework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of variables</td>
<td>New</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade level difficulty</td>
<td>New</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade level enjoyment</td>
<td>New</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Final Codes</th>
<th>Original Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership/principal roles</td>
<td>New</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pace</td>
<td>Time spent on English, Time spent on Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applications</td>
<td>College application and plans for college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic preparation for college</td>
<td>Future, Academic preparation for college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance counselors</td>
<td>New</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Track assignment</td>
<td>Own perception of other tracks, Own perception of own track, Fairness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Inevitably some overlapping still occurred. The “Fairness” code does not only lie in the “Track assignment” code but eventually appeared elsewhere such as in “Pace”. Plus, some codes on the revised list are marked as “New” in Table 3 thus showing how new codes naturally emerged after the second interviews.

Initial Theming

It is obvious that the code list from the second round is more specific and smaller than the original code list. This helped to identify overarching themes. The themes had already begun to emerge as I analyzed the data from the second round. In fact, I created a list of 17 ideas that I already saw as contributing to the results of the study (See Appendix E). This was not an attempt to actually create themes. Rather, I wanted to put on paper some thoughts that all participants agreed upon. By identifying these 17 ideas, I was creating a document that I could
share with the participants during the member checking process. I shared this list with my peer reviewer and committee members. It served as a discussion tool to consider what themes actually emerged from both interview rounds.

Member Checking

Upon another peer review and discussions with committee members, the member check process was conducted. I met individually with each of the participants to share the aspects of the tracking experience which they all agreed upon. Doing so helped to zero in on the impact of tracking on high school experience, overall essence of tracking, and the justice of tracking.

During the member checks, I shared the list of 17 ideas that I saw emerging from the data. Students mostly agreed with what I had prepared. However, participants also helped to clarify some things. First, they clarified some of their earlier statements. I would read what a participant said in an interview and ask for more information. Second, participants clarified some of my own statements to make sure that I understood their meanings. While they were all curious as to what was uncovered, the participants were most interested in what others said about their track level. Another area of interest was about school leadership. It was obvious that all students agreed on the following three leadership issues: (a) Students do not know what the principals’ daily activities include, (b) teachers who students respect are the school leaders, and (c) guidance counselors are not perceived as leaders.

Summary

This chapter explains the most intricate parts of data transformation. Ultimately in phenomenological studies, these processes initiate the textural descriptions. The themes that emerge from the coded and recoded data emerge as the texture (what the participants said) of the tracked experience.
CHAPTER V. FINDINGS: THE EXPERIENCE AND ESSENCE OF TRACKING IN HIGH SCHOOL

This chapter introduces the study’s six participants. Next, five themes that emerged from the data and captured the experience of tracked classes are fully explained, thus answering the first research question of this study, “How do 12th grade students describe their experience in tracked classes in high school?” Then, research question two is answered by summarizing how the essence of tracking impacts the overall high school experience.

Participants

Interview Setting

Participants were individually interviewed in a small private lab located inside of the high school library. While there were windows between the lab and library, a closed door gave a sense of privacy. We sat next to each other on the same side of a built-in desk and positioned the microphone between us. The chairs were fully cushioned and promoted comfort. Overall, the setting was familiar and easily accessible to the participants.

Rapport was established quickly and early on. When I initially talked individually with these students to ask for their participation, I put them at ease by offering information about myself and discussing their own interests. Then, at a later time when I collected the signed consent forms, I spoke with each person again. We discussed possible interview times, so we reviewed their course schedules, identified times to meet, and wrote hall passes. During those conversations, we spoke casually and informally. I also shared some of the information that I had gained about the participant when I reviewed his or her transcript. By the time of the first interviews, the participants were at ease with my role as a researcher and interviewer.
The participants are introduced below using pseudonyms. Everyone shared some criteria. Each participant was at least 18 years old, graduating on time, and stayed on the same track level in English and math courses throughout high school. In the participants’ descriptions below, track identifiers have been omitted intentionally. Since the study does not make track level comparisons, the participants’ specific track levels will not be revealed here. However, when the context calls for it, some direct quotes may reveal a participant’s track level.

**Mindy**

With a vibrant and outgoing personality, Mindy can best be described as colorful. Mindy is a white female who dresses nicely and ensures that she looks her best, as evidenced by her makeup and recently curled hair. She walks gracefully and sits upright. She enjoys conversation and is never at a loss for words. Mindy is a Christian and attends a local church youth group and Sunday services.

Mindy’s family moved to the community when she was in the 7th grade. Her older brother graduated from the school two years ago. She likes the shopping experience within the community and small-town feel of the growing suburban area. However, she is bothered by the wealth and social stratification that she sees among students. Mindy especially likes the social side of school and has been accepted to a local university to study education. In the future, she plans to teach at an elementary school, get married, and raise a family.

**Kris**

A self-proclaimed “vocabulary giant”, Kris likes to learn. Kris is a white male who prefers to wear baggy shorts and drab colored t-shirts. The seriousness with which he studies was quickly apparent when he rattled through a full list of books that he has read. He has
experienced tremendous growth as a person throughout high school, especially since his sophomore year when he fell into depression for six months.

While his average grades do not reflect his high work ethic, Kris enjoys getting to know his teachers. He likes intelligent conversations but, according to him, only with the right people. Kris gives up some introverted tendencies to converse with others whom he views as interesting. He keeps a small, close-knit set of friends. He has been accepted to a nearby state university and has narrowed down his major to art animation, musical performance, or psychology. He hopes to earn a doctoral degree someday. Kris said, “I’d rather do something I enjoy and not get paid than to do something I hate and get paid all the money in the world.”

Abby

Abby is as “real” as they come. She is Student Council President and gets involved in every activity that fits her schedule, which also includes volunteering at a local nursing home. While she has earned over a 4.0 GPA in high school, she keeps a down-to-earth perspective and attitude. Liked by about everyone, Abby has balanced her personal life with the demands of a tough course schedule. She is a time management guru and is quick to speak her mind. She is a white female.

Abby is a pragmatist who thinks carefully and rationally. She sees the bigger picture of what happens in school and life. She questions some school policies such as the 5.0 GPA scale for honors students. Abby will attend a state university and is thinking about studying finance, international business, or fashion merchandise. However, when talking about fashion merchandising, she said, “…but it’s weird because a lot of people say, ‘aren’t you going to be a doctor or lawyer?’…[because] that’s considered to be what honors kids should be doing is going to be a president or CEO.”
David

David is a Hispanic male who has lived in town his whole life and has extensive knowledge of it. David takes his educational experience seriously and has tremendous parent support and encouragement. David has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and his energy, positive attitude, and priority of learning made him successful in school and wrestling. David acts more like a young man than a teenager. He has a firm handshake and will maintain eye contact without any uneasy feelings.

David has always felt challenged in his classes and appreciates those teachers who themselves have a strong work ethic. He seeks extra academic help when he needs it without being prompted to do so. David plans to enroll in a ROTC program at a local college, get his bachelor’s degree, and then serve in the military upon graduation. He wants to be a teacher or personal trainer. If there were an award for “the person you would want your daughter to bring home”, David would win it.

Katie

Katie is a quiet but well-liked and pretty person. She is a white female who attended a local private school through her eighth grade year. A self-proclaimed bookworm, Katie has always gotten stellar grades only because of her admitted willingness to work harder than her classmates. She likes to attend athletic events and “rivalry week” activities but only when she has her homework done.

Katie gets excited when talking about science and math classes. Her favorite classes are anatomy and physics although she attributes her math success largely to a particular teacher who she said pushed her past her limits every day. Katie is going into a Pre-Medical program and
will later attend medical school to become a surgeon. Overall, she rates her high school experience as enjoyable and satisfying.

Adam

Adam is a white male who had excellent school attendance. Adam viewed school as necessary but not that interesting. He would do his homework sporadically and rarely fell asleep in class. Adam did not have a lot to say, but he took time to answer every question as best as he could.

Adam is going to a community college out of town upon graduation from high school. He will study HVAC (heating and air conditioning) service. His friend’s dad is a service technician whom Adam job shadowed earlier this year. In the future, he hopes to buy a house.

Themes

Through conversations with these participants, the experiences within the tracking system were described. Collectively, the essence of tracking reveals the impact that tracking has on the overall high school experience. As a result of the coding, sorting, peer review, and member checking processes, five themes captured the experience of students in tracked classes:

1. Appropriateness of placement
2. Student effort and perceived teacher effort
3. Similarity of instructional methods
4. Social influence of peers and family
5. View of others: different track levels and school leaders

Appropriateness of Placement

This section is broken down into chunks to further construct what appropriateness of tracking placement means. The areas of satisfaction, an accurate knowledge of an individual’s
track level, pace of instruction and learning, track level and future plans, and importance of track level as a schooling aspect more specifically discuss why the participants feel appropriately placed in the tracking system. Each of the participants agreed that he or she was placed into the appropriate track level. An overarching statement that represents the participants is that tracking suits people according to their own ability level.

_Satisfaction_

All participants are satisfied with their track level. Adam said, “Tracking is needed so that we make sure that we are teaching people at what level they are and make sure they understand everything.” If given the chance to change tracks, all participants would stay in their current track level, even though Kris said that if he was willing to put forth more effort he would try to move up a track level. While the issue of pace is discussed later, the students repeatedly talked about how the pace of their learning fits their needs and that if placed into a lower or higher track, pace of learning and instruction (either too fast or too slow) would bother them.

Mindy, a middle ability learner, stated, “I’m at the right level just because I don’t think that personally I could handle the honors class.” David stated, “Tracking evens the playing field a little bit and kind of helps you, where you best fit.” Abby said, “I am really happy where I am. I think that being surrounded by people who have the same work ethic and goals as you really help to keep you focused.” These ideas indicated that the participants are satisfied with both their track level and tracking as a whole.

_Accurate knowledge of track level_

All participants accurately identified their track placement. Additionally, several participants discussed when their knowledge of tracking or, stated differently, being put into different groups, came about. For the honors students, it was realized in elementary school with
pull out math classes for the smarter kids. One participant talked about how in the 3rd grade she was placed into an EXCELS Program (for advanced learners), and she said, “So I was pretty sure from an early age that I would be taking accelerated classes my entire life.”

For the other participants, knowledge of their track levels was realized by the time they got to high school or into the 9th grade year. David talked about how having an IEP made him realize his track placement. He explained that while there was a negative stigma with having an IEP, the facts that extra time and tutoring truly helped him to learn outweighed any negativity. Plus, he said that many people in the low tracks do not have IEPs, so any negative associations with IEPs and the low track go away over time.

All participants said that their track placement is not a big deal, an idea that is given full attention later in this chapter. When I told them about the large number of tracking articles that blamed tracking for numerous issues, students thought the articles were way off base.

**Pace of instruction and learning**

Participants appreciated the tailored pace for their ability level. They knew that their particular class moved faster or slower than the other classes. As Kris said, “pace is important, but students in any track level learn the same types of things anyway.” During the member check exercise, I asked Kris about this statement. He said that it was his way of saying that students of all tracks are equals because they pretty much learn the same content, even though pace fluctuates.

To give pace an interesting twist, David explained that teachers need to keep kids focused. He said,

The faster the teacher can get us the information while we are still paying attention is better…for the first 15 minutes [of class] we are trying to focus, we’re giving our
attention. After that, if [the teacher] is still talking about the same thing, good luck because we are going to be wandering off hearing the same thing over and over. On the same topic, Abby said, “When everything is slow, I get bored.” These statements captured how pace among tracking levels was a different pace issue than simply how time was organized in a particular class.

The high and low tracked participants favored tracked classes over non-tracked (mostly elective) courses because teachers in tracked classes tailored the pace at an appropriate level. One honors student said that it gets frustrating in elective courses because she is ready to move on before other students. She said, “[Honors students] feel really frustrated when we are in a non-honors class, like some of those students don’t understand the concepts as quickly as we do so we get frustrated a lot easier.” Similarly, Mindy said, “The pace for everyone is different, so teachers have it kind of hard because each student learns differently, so [teachers] have to go with the majority.” It seemed obvious that elective courses are geared toward middle ability students. One participant said that others call his low track, …the lower class, the stupider class. People say it’s the retarded class. It’s the slow class. But we just brush it off. No one takes it seriously or to offense, at least I don’t. I just know it’s a slower paced class. We learn the same stuff as other classes; it’s just slower. I just brush it off.

*Track level and future plans*

The participants’ specific track level complements their future plans. They all feel prepared for the future whether in college, work, or life. English classes were praised for the research paper assignments each year, regardless of track level. It was evident that the types of
activities and assignments trump the thought that perhaps low tracked students are not prepared for the future.

The high-tracked participants remarked how their classes prepared them for college. Those respondents guessed that all of their classmates are planning to attend a four-year university. One honors student simply said, “Academically, I am definitely ready to continue my learning in college.” She went on to cite time management and handling a lot of deadlines at once as the specific ingredients learned in her honors classes. She evidently learned more than just the content in her English and math classes.

Referring to her middle-tracked math class, a participant said that when she talked about math with friends who attended different high schools, what she thought was taking her a while to learn, other schools hadn’t gotten to yet. This put her mind at ease, and she concluded that she was ready for math in college, especially when compared to students in other schools. Since most teachers in tracked classes prepared their students for the future, the teacher impact on students is greater than any influence from the tracking system.

David talked about how in his track level people sometimes use academic labs, tutors, and libraries for help. He said, “I talked to my teachers who went to the college [where I’m headed] and they told me about the writing labs and math labs.” David thought that if he was in a higher track level, he might have been discouraged from attending college because of his IEP.

Track level and the college application processes are not directly linked. The application process is an issue not related to track level because the application process occurs outside of class. The only assistance that was given at school occurred in all senior English classes when students were required to write a senior essay; most students used the essay to answer a college application question. While the role of guidance counselors is discussed later, it is appropriate to
say here that guidance counselors did not provide help with college applications either.

Preparing applications took place within the participants’ families, which is discussed in a later section.

*Importance of track level as a schooling aspect*

Participants were asked to rate the importance of track level relative to seven other aspects of schooling. Track level, personal work ethic, amount of homework, friends, hand picking your schedule, teacher ability, and parent influence were the schooling aspects. Participants rated “track level” in 4th and 5th place once each, with the rest of the responses being 6th or 7th. This showed that track level was not a driving issue for the participants since the other aspects were mostly rated as more important.

I asked participants to discuss the three or so top things that affected their high school experience. No one mentioned anything about tracking or course content. Participants talked about friends, sports, band, school activities, and teachers.

In conclusion for this section, all participants felt appropriately placed within the track system. They knew their track level and were satisfied with it, appreciated the tailored pace, felt prepared for the future, and did not feel that their track level was a major issue in their schooling overall. Apparently, appropriate and accurate track placement was a component of the overall tracking experience.

*Student Effort and Perceived Teacher Effort*

Effort in school was a multifaceted issue. Participants talked about effort numerous times as a symbiotic relationship between students and teachers because students’ effort was directly impacted by their perception of teachers’ effort in tracked classes. The track system encouraged effort. Lastly, the course content within a class was an effort issue in a tracked system. Effort
was an integral part of the tracking experience. A capstone comment in this area came from Abby:

A great teacher is someone who works and actually puts forth an effort as much as he or she expects their students to [give] and actually knows the material…not just someone who comes in and reads something they got out of a book but actually did their own research.

Effort and the track system

Participants all agreed that tracking encouraged people to try harder. They spoke in terms about how tracking makes people feel challenged while balancing that with feeling like they could succeed. Mindy said, “I think it’s good for people who can take honors to take honors because it’s kind of pointless for them to take [college prep] classes if they already know how to do it.” When students feel bored, their effort stops. Abby, an honors student, said, “if I was in a college prep course, I would not be as driven.” Likewise, if a student feels that he will not succeed he will stop putting forth effort to learn. David explained that his track level in English class was good for him because he did well and felt proud of himself. Had he been in a higher track level, David feared he would not succeed.

Perception of the teacher

Students put forth the same degree of effort as their teachers in tracked classes. The participants explained that a teacher’s effort is easy to see and plainly realized by everyone in class. As one participant said, “It’s really hard for students to put forth an effort in class where the teacher isn’t putting forth the effort.” Abby put it another way by stating, “One thing that I really noticed was that if someone really likes or dislikes the teacher it’s only based on whether
or not the teacher actually put forth an effort.” Teachers who put forth effort have classes where students try harder and respect the teacher.

A teacher’s personality was intertwined with this discussion. Katie said, I think [my effort] depends a lot on the teacher because I was lucky to have some pretty interesting teachers. They always seemed a little quirky which is really nice. It helped my class[mates] stay interested.

Another participant said, “a lot of work ethic is derived, I think, from whether you like the teacher.” At some point during the interviews, all participants stated that liking the teacher impacts how they perform in class.

_Summary of the class_

When the participants felt challenged by the class material, they had to try harder. Whether or not a student liked or disliked the content of the class impacted the amount of effort given on a regular basis. When participants like the class content, they try harder. Math class, which was generally viewed as harder than English class, ultimately emerged as the course that required more effort.

Some responses about math content included those from Kris, who said, “I think I did the best in my sophomore year because I worked with linear objects and seeing things.” Abby stated, “I was really, really challenged in math. I really worked hard. English, not so much.” Adam simply stated, “When I was challenged [in math] I put forth more effort. You know you gotta do it, so you sit down and do it.”

I asked whether or not liking to read impacted liking English class. The response was that those two elements are not related. Kris said, “Reading and enjoyment of English are not a complete correlation.” Abby said, “There is so much more to English than just reading.” Katie
said that the writing and discussions tended to soften her up so that if she did not want to read she could contribute to class another way. Kris later said, “I like to be challenged, and I think that with some projects in English like research papers and reading poetry…and having to determine the underlying causes and effects of what they really meant, the subliminal stuff…made me work hard.”

It was evident in the participants’ dialogue that the tracking system contributed to increased student effort. Additionally, the personality of a teacher emerged as an important motivator for students. Course content played its role in effort too. Ultimately, effort became an ingredient of the tracking experience in high school.

**Similarity of Instructional Methods**

In the first round of interviews, I asked participants to describe their typical math and English homework assignments and how time was spent in class. As a result of those discussions, in the second round of interviews I asked more specifically about types of instruction. The conversations yielded evidence to conclude that participants from all track levels complete similar learning activities. This similarity of instructional methods was another component of the tracked experience.

**Math class**

Regardless of the track level or grade level, students in math courses generally complete the same routine. All participants explained that each week a new chapter in math was covered. Monday through Tuesday introduced the new material and included homework from the text or a worksheet each night. Wednesday was review day for the test on Thursday. On Friday, the test was reviewed, and the new topic for the coming week was introduced. “Math instruction is all about routine,” Kris and Abby stated.
Another similarity in math instruction was that math concepts build over time. David said, “Math is a lot of memorization, and if you don’t remember what you learned in the beginning of the year, you’re not going to do well closer to the end of the year, with it all building up.” Mindy stated, “[Math] is harder [than English] to understand. It’s more like memorization, it’s like what you’ve learned throughout the whole year kinda all builds up and then you have to apply everything.”

The instructional methods in all track levels of math were nearly the same. Math teachers lecture on Monday and Tuesdays but also allowed some group learning to occur. Four participants talked about the bookwork that they had to complete during class time. All participants explained that there is math homework almost every night; however, the assignments only take about a half hour each night to complete. One difference perceived across tracks came from an honors participant who said that in her class, people took their own math notes, but her friends in the middle track were given prepared notes by their math teacher.

*English class*

Students said that an English teacher’s personality drives the type of instruction. Kris said,

A teacher who can teach you something but also keep you interested, like with a story or correlation, that makes the class work interesting. My favorite teachers have very interesting lives…and teachers who do a lot of work after school to make sure that things go well are the best. If you can teach it where people learn and know what you’re talking about by putting it on similar terms [is the definition of ‘great teacher’].

Mindy stated, “Our English classes are pretty cool, and our teachers change things up so that you don’t get bored. Cited activities by the participants were lecture, discussion, coordinated teamed
activities (group projects), worksheets, tests, oral presentations, and students teaching a chapter from a novel. Abby said, “English changes every day because [the teacher] is so outgoing so she always has a different story each day to go along with the lesson.”

Group activities dominated the type of instruction in English classes. Katie said, “We got to do more group activities in our English classes [than math] and that was always fun.” Commenting about group work Adam said, “I like that and think it’s helpful…if everyone works together.” On the same topic Kris said, “It’s good to have group projects that you present to class to overcome public speaking fears and learn more.”

In English classes, the same content is taught regardless of track level. When asked to discuss the types of activities in English, the participants mostly agreed on what received the most attention. Participants cited studying poetic elements (theme, rhyme, rhythm, simile, metaphor), writing research papers, reading novels, reading short stories, and writing essays as typical activities in any track level.

To conclude the similarity of instruction theme, it looks like appropriateness of pace, student effort and teacher personality are the keys. Kris talked a lot about the relationship between instruction and effort. He said,

The way a teacher can teach, whether you like them or not, based on how they teach and how interesting they are, will certainly affect how much effort you put into the class. So, definitely, how understandable they make it—not how easy it is—will affect your effort.

At a later time, Kris also said, “Some teachers know what they’re talking about but they don’t have that ability to relay it to students and they try to explain it, but it sounds too complicated. They can’t simplify things. Boring teachers are bad.” Quite accurately, Kris saw the
relationship between instructional method, effort, and teacher personality. They all played a role in the participants’ tracking experiences.

Social Influence of Peers and Family

This section talks about the social influences that surround tracking. The people (other than teachers) who contributed to the participants’ tracking experiences are highlighted here. The discussion revolves around peers, cliques, and family members.

Peers

In tracked classes, students have been with the same classmates for multiple years. High and low ability students are familiar with other class members because there are usually only one or two classes at those levels. Middle tracked courses that have as many as eight different classes contain students who are less familiar with one another. When asked to rate the seven aspects of schooling in order of importance for having a positive high school experience (presented earlier), the “friends” aspect was rated most important twice, second most important three times, and third most important once. The issue of peers is also evident in some of the comments below.

Cliquies

Everyone agreed that tracking did not directly contribute to cliques. Other factors contributed to cliques such as extracurricular activities, out-of-school interests, how people spend their time, family house location, and even the way that people dress. Adam said, “Maybe cliques are from the people you grow up with, like your neighborhood.” Kris said,

I agree that track level does not establish cliques. When you’re growing up you become friends with some people and then in high school you stay friends with them.

It’s just influence of friends that makes cliques.
Katie, David, Mindy, and Abby cited athletics, theater, and music activities as those things that contribute to cliques. David went on to say,

Your preference in dressing definitely helps with cliques or little groups getting together...they have to see something that is similar to themselves before they think ‘maybe this person would be nice to talk to.’ If you see something similar about them or something that puts you both together, then you think you might have something to talk about.

At times some participants talked in ways that might imply that tracking contributes to cliques. For example, David said, “I think that sometimes you feel more comfortable with one group just because we sit in the classroom with the same people most of the day.” Kris said, “There are certain people that I just hang out with in the same track level because we’re around each other so much.” When I asked David and Kris to explain these comments, both guys reinforced their belief that tracking does not make the cliques. Proximity or familiarity was the cause for some friendships to emerge.

The above statements are recaptured through Abby’s comments. “I get along with pretty much everyone in my grade so I don’t think that cliques come from tracking.” Also, Katie said, “I’ve never really gotten into the whole honors clique with honors friends all going in the same direction.” It appeared that if there were small cliques established within track levels that my six participants were not part of them.

*Family members*

Family members assisted tracked students in their classes. Participants most often cited their mom or older siblings in helping them with homework. Oftentimes, a student’s track assignment was similar to the parent’s academic experience. Also, two of the six participants
planned to attend the same college as an older sibling. Students turn to family members for helping in completing the college application process. Mindy said,

With the actual [college] application it’s probably my brother [who helped me] because he [attends the school that I’m applying to], so he helped me the most when I was getting ready to apply.

Given the list of seven aspects of schooling that was presented earlier, parent influence was mostly rated in the middle of the pack.

In conclusion, the social aspects of schooling definitely impacted the participants’ high school experiences. However, the social aspect was separate from the track system. Therefore, tracking could not be the underlying cause of social construction in the school. Too many other elements made more of an influence on the participants’ social lives than the tracking system.

View of Others: Students in Different Track Levels and School Leaders

The way that the participants viewed students in other track levels produced some interesting conversations. Similarly, the participants guessed how students from other tracks viewed their own track members. Those discussions are given here. Additionally, the way that the participants perceived school leaders is addressed.

Other track levels

There are two ways to go about this section: (a) the way the participants viewed other track levels and those students in them, and (b) how the participants thought that students from other track levels view their own track level. Both sides of this issue shed more light on how tracking impacts the high school experience.

The participants viewed other tracks in a neutral way, even while exhibiting a sense of care for those students. Katie said, “I don’t really take [track level] as a big role when I look at
another person. I don’t think that it plays a big part in how I see them.” Mindy said, “I think it’s
good for people who can take honors to take honors, because it’s kind of pointless for them to
take classes if they already know how to do it. Why not challenge yourself and learn more?”
Mindy also discussed how lower ability students should not be forced into a higher track by
saying, “if that’s what they should take, then they should take it. If they take English 410 [low
tracked class] they will do well and will actually be proud of themselves, rather than taking a
higher class that’s not good for them.” Perhaps unbeknownst to Mindy, she accurately captured
how the low tracked students felt.

Mindy, who is not an honors student, talked about the pressure she thinks that honors
student face to complete homework and get good grades. David reiterated Mindy’s point by
saying that higher tracked students, “are assigned more work, so I think personally I am at the
right level for myself.” On this topic, Kris said, “For people who can take honors classes, I
think they should because they can prepare themselves or learn more.” All of these statements
were made only because each participant felt placed into the correct track level.

Some comments showed the perceived differences among track levels. Abby gave the
story of how in her junior year she went into an elective (non-tracked) class. The teacher said
that there was going to be a discussion, so Abby, an honors student, instinctively got out her
notebook and pen. Everyone looked at her as if to say, “What are you doing?” Abby was just as
surprised that only the honors students were preparing to take notes. This story illustrates that
some differences among track levels occur. The same thought was captured again by Katie who
said, “if I was put in a classroom with all different track levels that I would establish myself with
the smarter people...knowing that they are doing a little bit more.”
Abby told another story to illustrate how the people in the honors track view the middle, college preparatory tracked students. Some people in honors courses place themselves above the middle tracked group. She explained,

Those other people out there “The Sheep” that is what we call them, the honors students call college prep students “The Sheep”, the people who won’t go as far [in life] just because they are not taking honors classes, but that’s not true at all. In reality you don’t even need a college degree to be successful in life. So, I think that the big problem with honors classes is that it separates the honors kids from college prep kids. I think there needs to be more integration so that people can reach a level and college prep kids can be pushed too.

Later in the interview when I asked Abby about cliques, she said, “I’m an exception because I’ve never really gotten into the whole honors clique with honors friends all going in the same direction. I’m kind of with The Sheep. Yes, I hang around The Sheep! They’re fun Sheep!”

While it might be guessed that low track levels were viewed with more negativity than the other levels, few comments made during the interviews showed this to be true. In fact Katie guessed that students in the low tracks were, “more accepting of others” even though an honors participant said that general education classes are more thought of to be for underachievers. A different participant guessed that in the low track levels the teachers do not grade as stringently as in higher levels.

The other side of this issue is how the participants thought that students from other track levels view their own track level. Adam made some powerful remarks about perceptions of the low track. “People say it’s the retard class. It’s the slow class, the slackers…others find my track to be easy and dumb with the way we’re taught sometimes.” David, a low-tracked student,
perceived that when middle tracked students move into the low track, sometimes there are problems. “They think it could be a little easier, and they underestimate it and then they end up falling more behind and have to work even harder or just give up.” Kris, from the middle track, said about honors students, “I don’t think they really view college prep as like us viewing general education as being lower than what they are at. It’s just like the honors classes are more challenging for them than the college prep.” Honors participants both claimed that people view them as overachievers, competitive, arrogant, and geeky.

During the member checking exercise I met individually with the participants. I explained that the way some participants thought that others viewed their track was inaccurate. From the participants’ own responses, they don’t view other track levels with any serious level of animosity. The honors and low tracked participants were glad to hear that what they thought was happening was mostly not the case.

**View of school leaders**

Since tracking is a school-wide issue, offering the participants a chance to express their opinions about school leadership seemed appropriate. In this section, the participants’ views of school leadership are given. In short, no participant ever made a connection between tracking and a school leader’s decision-making duties. Rather, tracking and school leadership seemed to be completely separate issues. However, some views of school leadership are appropriate to discuss as they relate to the overall high school experience.

First, well-liked and trusted teachers were viewed as the school leaders by the participants more often than the head principal or two assistant principals. Kris said that teachers are the adult leaders in the school, “because we spend the most time with them and…turn to them the most.” Mindy added that a personal relationship is needed with people to first perceive
them as a leader, which is why Mindy also views her teachers, not principals, as the school leaders. David explained that his IEP case manager (a teacher) is a leader. He said,

Especially due to tracking you only see some teachers. You might think they are the greatest people due to this. So I’d say for my track level that [my case manager] holds a lot of power…everybody knows she is going to watch your case very closely and make sure that if there’s a problem, she’s going to find you…I think she is very important.

In the first round of interviews nothing was mentioned about administrators. Commenting on this, Abby explained,

It’s because we don’t work with any of the administrators day-to-day. We don’t see that; they’re not a part of our daily lives. I understand they affect me, but I don’t see them everyday, so I don’t think to mention them. They’re not the ones personally instructing me.

Katie continued the thought by saying, “Teachers are leaders because they have more direct influence on students than the principal…so I would follow my teachers.”

Secondly, the participants do not accurately know what school leaders do. When I asked the participants, “What are a principal’s main job duties?” the responses were similar. Participants said that a principal deals with discipline, school safety, discrepancies between teachers, and ordering supplies such as computers. Kris captured these thoughts by saying, “If you talk with an administrator, it’s because you’re going bad in school or you’ve done something that has caused you to go to the office.” A lack of visibility was cited by Mindy for why she didn’t know what a principal does during the day. She said, “Most kids don’t really see them very often.” Abby thought that principals sit in their office and answer phone calls. Another participant said, “The principal has to run a tight ship. They’re not only watching over the
teachers’ performance but they are also evaluating the school, like maybe, they are the president of our little nation, our high school.” When I first asked about a principal’s duties, three participants said, “I don’t know.” This interview question was considered to be one of the toughest questions.

Thirdly, guidance counselors received only negative comments by all participants and apparently were not perceived as leaders. From the participants’ views, the guidance counselors did not assist with college applications, did not get back to students in a timely manner and did not have much to do within the whole school.

David explained that because of a guidance counselor error, he was ineligible to wrestle his sophomore year, an event that in David’s words was, “emotionally draining” and “cost me a lot for my sport.” The situation was that David was not enrolled in enough credits to be eligible to participate in sports. He said,

I was younger and didn’t really understand how the school worked, how many credits I needed. Or when I was assigned a class, I thought, ‘Well they [the guidance counselors] know what they’re doing, just go with it’ instead of paying attention to maybe I do have too many study halls…..

While it might be understandable for David to explode in anger over the situation, he handled it very well. While he said that he lost confidence in his guidance counselor, he gave a solution to the problem. David said,

Make sure to have your case manager talk it over with your guidance counselor because I don’t think they ever really connect too well. I’ve had certain instances where my case manager [recommended a course] and then my guidance counselor said the total opposite. Counselors just are not helpful. After that point [with ineligibility] I started to
try to take things on myself in making sure I was looking at classes and stuff.

In conclusion, the way that the participants viewed other track levels was discussed, including the perceived view that others have of the participants’ track levels. Also, school leaders were not perceived as impacting the tracking system, and school leaders did not significantly contribute to the overall high school experience for the six participants. The view of school administrators is, at best, flawed. Teachers emerged as the leaders of the school.

**Summary**

Five themes captured the experience of students in tracked classes: (a) appropriateness of placement, (b) student effort and perceived teacher effort, (c) similarity of instructional methods, (d) social influence of peers and family, and (e) view of others: different track levels and school leaders. These themes combined together created the essence of tracking as a whole.

**The Impact of Tracking on High School Experience**

The descriptions of the high school tracked experience given above provide the answer to the second research question, which states, “How does the essence of tracking impacts 12th graders’ high school experiences?” The answer from the participants is that tracking does not substantially impact the high school experience as a whole. Other elements impact high school experience more than track level, including (a) level of involvement in sports and extracurricular activities, (b) friends influence, and (c) teachers.

Participants said tracking makes no impact, but it appeared that tracking is still important to them. Some statements made by participants indicated that tracking influenced them (e.g. peers, course selection) even though participants did not attribute tracking as the reason. These contradictions of perceptions and statements show tracking to be working in the background of the participants’ lives.
CHAPTER VI. FINDINGS: TRACKING AND THE ETHIC OF JUSTICE

This chapter answers the third research question: “How are students’ tracking experiences represented on the ethic of justice spectrum?” During both interview rounds, participants explained whether or not the track system met their needs. As a result of those explanations, the system of tracking was considered a just one by the participants. Also, based on participants’ responses, the location of tracking on the ethic of justice spectrum is identified.

Tracking Is a Just System

The system of tracking was perceived by the participants as mostly exhibiting qualities of justice. In this section, the issues of fairness, appropriateness of placement, and grade point average calculations are examined.

Fairness

The participants each believed that the system of tracking was fair to them. David said, “Tracking helped me to improve academically and socially. Without tracking my future plans for college would be drastically different.” Mindy commented that tracking is fair. However, she said that standardized testing is not fair for the simple reason that some people who are not good test takers are limited in where they get accepted for college.

Another positive example of fairness also came from Adam who said, “Yeah, tracking is fair. Not everyone is on the same level. You have to divide them up into the different classes and teach it slower or faster.” Additionally, both honors participants agreed that tracking is fair because their math and English classes challenge them, which would not occur without tracking.

There were a few comments where participants viewed their own track experience as a fair one, yet they simultaneously thought that others would view them as having a sort of advantage. For example, Kris said that in his situation he thinks tracking is fair, while others
may view his situation as unfair. He said, “I’ve gotten way more credit than what is needed to graduate and still pulled a 3.0 GPA with a 23 ACT score. It [tracking] might not be seen quite as fair because of the fact that I’ve done so much.” Kris thinks that other classmates who were in lower tracks may view his tracking experience as unfair because of the success he has achieved.

This contradiction is later captured by the two honors participants who viewed the middle track as much easier than theirs but would not want to ‘move down’ because it would be too easy. Also the top two tracks think that the low ability track is easier and ‘dumbed down’ yet they agreed there is a need for varied tracks and do not feel ‘ripped off’. Upper tracked students think that low tracked teachers expect less, do not require as much work, and do not grade papers as critically. So, while students rate their own track as fair, their perceptions of others suggested some fairness contradiction.

Ultimately, David’s thoughts reflected the fairness issue. When asked whether tracking as a procedure/process is fair, he said,

I believe so because without [tracking] we would all be left to have higher students (students with greater abilities) [in classes] with some of the lower students. It might not challenge one person enough or be too hard for another student. So, tracking evens the playing field a little bit and kind of helps you, where you best fit.

Abby said, “I am really happy where I am. I think that being surrounded by people who have the same work ethic and goals as you really help to keep you focused.” These ideas secured that the participants saw their experience with both their track level and tracking as a whole as a fair one.

**Appropriateness of Placement**

As highlighted in CHAPTER 5, each participant felt appropriately placed within the track system. All participants said that if given the chance to change tracks, they would not change.
Plus, most participants felt that if they wanted to change tracks they could, which is known as track mobility. Mindy said, “If I’d have wanted to I probably could have gone to a lower level. If I really wanted to go to honors, I probably would just have had to work harder. But I didn’t want to…I was content where I was.” Justice is only evident in any system when those affected by it feel treated appropriately within it. When asked about changing tracks, Abby said, “Could I have [changed tracks]? Well I could have, but in all honesty I probably wouldn’t ask just because…I wouldn’t hear the end of it from my parents.” Katie reflected Abby’s comments by saying, “I think my parents have really pushed for the honors thing…I would feel almost guilty for giving up in the honors classes.” It appeared that factors other than the tracking structure impacted track mobility.

The justness of tracking referred more to pace and delivery than to the course content or instructional methods. While pace and delivery fluctuated according to ability level, the course content (what is studied) and instructional method (how learning occurs) were generally perceived to be similar. A reminder here is necessary. The participants’ perceptions contradict reality, since content and instructional methods are actually not the same in every track level.

Nonetheless, Mindy, a middle ability learner, stated, “I’m at the right level just because I don’t think that personally I could handle the honors class.” When Adam was asked about the fairness of tracking, he talked more about being appropriately placed within the tracking system due to pace of instruction. He said,

Yeah [tracking is fair]. Not everyone is on the same level. You have to divide them up into the different classes and teach it slower or faster. If everyone was together, the teacher would teach one style and I’d probably be failing. Or, I’d be lost.
Grade Point Average Calculations

There were some strong remarks about how honors courses are graded on a 5.0 scale, as compared to all other courses that are based on the 4.0 scale. In other words, the grade of “B” in an honors course actually computes to an “A”. And, an “A” in an honors course counts 1.0 point higher than an “A” in all non-honors courses. Some participants questioned the justness of the honors GPA calculation, which is a byproduct of the tracking system.

A few comments from non-honors participants revealed that the 5.0 GPA system is viewed as unfair because it gives honors students an advantage. Even one honors student questioned the system but would not change it because it would hurt her GPA. Abby, the honors student, questioned the very system from which she benefits. She said,

I don’t think the 5.0 grade thing is fair. Cause a lot of times kids are working just as hard in the other [non-honors] classes. Why am I not working that hard in some honors classes? But I’m still getting the 5.0. The 5.0 grade structure in honors gets kids who don’t really want to be there…they don’t want to work; they want the extra point.

Abby also explained that some honors students do not take classes that they really want to take because of the 5.0 GPA system. She explained the following scenario: if a student has a GPA that is over a 4.0, when the student takes a non-honors course, a grade of “A” in the course will actually pull down the overall GPA. Therefore, honors students refrain from taking most elective courses. Abby said,

…there are a lot of honors kids who don’t take choir or the arts and won’t take other fun classes that really teach you something that you need to know in life…because it lowers their overall GPA. Kids aren’t taking the classes they really want to…because of the 4.0 thing.
Later in the same interview, Abby talked about how at the end of the quarter, some honors kids will slack off if they have an “A-” because that grade is still weighted more heavily by GPA than an “A” in the college prep classes. In the second interview, Abby talked further about the GPA issue and said,

…especially the whole weighted grade [in honors classes]—that should not exist at all…I want to be high ranked, obviously, because I want to be in the top 10% [of the graduating class] but I’m not going to go out of my way and do anything unethical or ruin my life just to get a good GPA.

The other honors participant was comfortable with the 5.0 system. She said, “Honors courses are more difficult and take more effort, so the GPA should reflect it and be weighted heavier for the amount of work required. I’m all ok with the 5.0 scale.” Adam said that people in his low track don’t worry about getting a 4.0 or high GPA. “They just want to get by, pass, and graduate. Probably people in higher tracking levels try to get that 4.0 and get scholarships.” Mindy said,

If your track level doesn’t work for you, then your GPA is going to be bad. If you are in honors classes and aren’t doing well in it because you don’t think you should be there, then your GPA is not going to be that good. So it kind of depends; GPA depends on the track level you are in. If you are in one that works for you, then your GPA will be fine.

In the end, GPA configuration may have emerged as the most passionate issue related to the justice of tracking. To soften the blow, Abby concluded by saying,

[Next year] no one is really going to care what my high school GPA was. And that’s
where kids just baffle me. They go and complain [to teachers] about every point they get marked wrong because of GPA. It’s just a GPA…not something that determines what kind of person you are.

Kris added that he never thought a lot about his GPA until this year because, “…I wanted to get my GPA up to reduce my car insurance. GPA is not a big deal overall.”

In summary, the analysis thus far reveals that tracking exhibits justice for the most part. These results show how tracking is perceived in a personal, individual way. Each participant felt happy about his/her track placement because it worked for the individual.

The Ethic of Justice and Tracking

The ethic of justice (Starratt, 1991) served as the leadership framework of this study. Returning to it now, the third research question is answered. On the ethic of justice spectrum, the participants’ tracking experiences swung toward individual rights and away from utilitarian notions. The motivating factor of tracking is revealed through the lens of the participants to help demonstrate why tracking conforms to respecting individual rights.

Motivating Factor of Tracking

An idea posed in CHAPTER 2 that helps to determine the justice value of something is to examine the motivating factor or salient feature for a decision or system. To wrap up the justness of tracking, and to further realize why tracking is geared toward individual choice, I look to participants’ responses to determine, “What is the motivating factor of the tracking system?” The answer to this question demonstrates why tracking is situated toward the individual side of the justice spectrum. According to the participants, the motivating factor of tracking is to encourage the growth of students according to each person’s ability level. Stated another way, tracking accounts for the learning differences among students.
Multiple times, Kris spoke in ways that showed tracking to be geared toward himself as an individual, rather than tracking being set up for the common good. He said, “Since I like to learn I do more than is required. My track level doesn’t pertain to that. It’s more about my enthusiasm for learning.” Later, Kris explained that tracking encouraged his independence in course selection. He said,

I am not on the honors track, but with all the classes I’ve taken, I have enough credits to actually be on it except my GPA isn’t high enough…we want to learn, even though we are seniors, about anything we can. This year I’m taking microbiology, sociology, psychology…to keep myself on a learning path.

Kris explained that because of his middle track level, he was motivated to take extra courses just for the benefit of learning. This idea spoke to how tracking encouraged creativity in course selection for the individual.

I asked Kris what would happen if tracking was gone and students were all housed in the same classes. He said, “If there were no tracks, the lower kids would need to work harder and take more time. The honors students would do well easily. It would not be a great thing to do because people learn at different abilities.” These thoughts showed that tracking’s current practices are geared toward individual needs. If tracking was gone, the individual needs would no longer be met.

The tracking system is motivated by individual needs, thus nonconsequential in nature. A participant often claimed that tracking met his or her own needs. “Tracking is good for me”, “Without tracking I would fail or be lost”, and similar dialogue confirmed that the individuals within the school walls viewed something personal within tracking. The fact that the participants thought that track mobility was quite possible showed how their perception of the system allows
movement and individual choice. As Kris said, “Tracking is needed so that we make sure that we are teaching people at their level [of learning] and make sure they understand everything.” Just because tracking works for a collection of individuals does not make it geared toward the greater good.

Tracking is nonconsequential and geared toward individually helping each student. While only Abby and Kris truly talked about tracking as a system, the collection of responses taken together showed that tracking encourages the individuals within tracking to grow independently.

Summary

Tracking is a just system. The participants’ voices explained why tracking works for them, meets their needs, and in most cases, the needs of their classmates. The tracking experience in high school was fair, and students felt appropriately placed, even while some questions about the GPA calculations arose. Within the ethic of justice leadership framework, tracking respects the individuals that it shapes. As this discussion shifts toward a discussion of this study’s findings, a school leader’s role within a district that tracks its students is important to capture.
CHAPTER VII. DISCUSSION

With such a large philosophical base to this study, a return to philosophical concepts is necessary. Student voice will resound once again, this time to analyze, evaluate, and also to scrutinize the tracking literature. The dramatic importance of teachers’ roles in education is stressed, including how school leaders should respond to the participants who indicated that principals appeared as little more than ghosts in the school. Recommendations that focus on individual rights and student perspectives are given.

Return to Philosophy

All philosophers served as educators in some capacity. Aristotle contributed his thoughts about what decision makers see as the salient feature of a moral dilemma (Bricker, 1993). As provided in CHAPTER 6, the salient, most important feature of tracking is the motivation to meet students at their level and to encourage their growth. As the participants shared their tracking experiences, it became obvious that the track system in their high school based grouping decisions on the ability level of each student. Tailored pace and instruction according to ability level produces students who, in the end, appreciate and can take advantage of a curriculum that is appropriate for them.

While Aristotle was a consequentialist, his contribution of what motivates a moral system is substantiated through the participants’ reflections. When two sides pick a different salient feature of the same issue, then a moral dilemma is born. However, with the issue of tracking, the participants explained that a moral dilemma did not exist.

Deontological ethics, namely through Immanuel Kant, suggests that we can ignore the results of a decision only if we follow already established rules of conduct that themselves secure justice (C. E. Johnson, 2001). The right to choose is primary for deontologists, yet in curriculum
design, there are so many factors that result from tracking today, as compared to tracking in the 1980s and 1990s. For example, today there are aligned standards per subject/grade level, state graduation tests, and a national educational bar for all to reach. We cannot blindly ignore what happens after tracking is institutionalized. We have to pay attention to consequences even though we are not motivated primarily by them.

While tracking is nonconsequential there are some consequences to tracking such as the demographic disproportions that sometimes resulted from ability grouping (Oakes, 1985; Page 1991). In the participants’ experiences, being grouped in classes according to ability level did not also result in drastic demographic disproportions. Tracking, as it has been defined in this study, sorts students by ability level. To sort students for consequential reasons such as gender, race, or socio-economic status would defeat the purpose of tracking as a curriculum design. Another curriculum design (e.g. the non-tracked system) might sort students for consequential reasons; however, tracking cannot oblige since it is considered to be nonconsequential.

Therefore, while tracking accounts for the rights of the individual and does not require a consequential view, I call for a new deontological stance. The consequences that result from tracking should be realized and dealt with because as a school leader it is important to keep a pragmatic and holistic view of things. We need to ensure that tracking is motivated by student ability grouping, while simultaneously accounting for those student groups that tracking creates. Also, the way that we spend our resources requires constant vision and understanding. We must continually critique the system to ensure that justice remains intact across multiple factors that impact the curriculum. Challenging flawed rules is an element of justice and is supported in stage six of Kohlberg’s model (Kohlberg, 1984).
Some feelings about resource distribution have been expressed. Since distributive justice was discussed earlier, some thoughts about it upon this study’s conclusion are needed. In relation to tracking, how is distributive justice highlighted in the tracked system of education in America? To follow Aristotle’s lead, resources should be provided equally to each track level (Aristotle, 322 B.C.). John Rawls suggested that the least advantaged group be given extra resources (Zucker, 2001), so the low tracked classes presumably would require additional funds or support. However, we must also keep in mind that gifted programs or high tracked courses may emerge as the least advantaged group. In the school where this study took place, I learned that the gifted program was considered a peripheral service because the program received mainly leftover money from the overall budget.

In this study, the participants were not asked about resources allocated per track level; administrators make those decisions. From what was presented about distribution in CHAPTER 2 combined with the way that tracking appeared in this study, it seems obvious that fairness, not equality, in resource allocation should be the goal. R. J. Starratt reminded us to ask, “How shall we govern ourselves” (1991, p. 191)? Allocating resources responsibly and justly is only possible if school leaders bring with them a sense of what fairness means.

The lines between liberal egalitarianism and libertarianism are blurred, yet they appear in an argument about tracking. Liberal egalitarians such as John Rawls apply the social contract concept and remain nonconsequential. If students accept the social contract of the tracking system, then students automatically must abide by the rules of tracking. Unfortunately, in likely all schools that have track systems, students are forced into tracking and cannot choose to live within it or outside of it. Students are the ones who may be forced to give up some of their personal liberties, resulting in a loss of student freedom due to tracking. If the work of a
libertarian such as Nozick can be applied here (Nozick, 1974) then students would have a right to choose between being tracked or not since libertarians focus more on the process of justice and the moral agency of the decision maker than the picture that results from the collective individual decisions.

Is it feasible to run two curriculum designs within a school? Should students be permitted to choose either tracked or non-tracked courses to account for student freedom? If non-tracked courses were available, would students want them? According to the participants of this study, students would choose to be tracked. Therefore, two curriculum designs (tracked and non-tracked) are likely not needed in a high school. Rather, the favored curriculum design—tracking, as experienced by these participants—needs to include some components that enable student freedom. In their experience, the track system did not automatically erase the participants’ freedoms. Student freedom was expressed within the track system by being able to change tracks, not by getting rid of tracking as a whole. Track mobility is a necessary factor in a system that respects individual rights (Hallinan, 1996). Administrators cannot logistically tailor a curriculum for every student, but they can (and should) track because it promotes, in part, a student’s freedom of movement.

The principle of equal treatment comes back into play (Strike et al., 2005). We can treat people differently based on the one factor that we use to sort students into track levels—meeting needs of students according to their ability. Equality is rejected whereas fairness is supported, such as in the resource distribution argument. In tracking, those students who can do more, do more and are placed in a high track. Those who can do less are placed in a lower track, accordingly. There is no injustice here. Rather, the participants used the principle of equal treatment as their defense for calling the track system just. But, rather than ignoring the
irrelevant factors of tracking as the principle of equal treatment encourages, we have learned as the new deontologists to account for such things as track mobility.

When students enter the track system and grasp the system as it was intended (play by the rules such as not skipping into a course if prerequisites are not met—or exerting parent pressure in the guidance office), justice emerges nonconsequentially. Even if a particular track level is harder or easier than another one, the playing field of all classrooms becomes one where no one sits the bench. Upholding an individual’s right to pick a track level, change track levels, or at the least feel comfortable where he or she is placed speaks to the fact that justice emerges from the track system.

Starratt said that we “govern ourselves while carrying out educating activities…by observing justice” (1991, p. 191). In regard to tracking, I believe that he means we must critique the tracking system, question it, and evaluate it consistently. Otherwise as administrators we may forget to care enough about the curriculum design in our schools. The ethic of justice, when exercised properly, helps us to balance the justice theories with the hope of finding a correct balance with the systems in our schools.

In regard to the three court cases reviewed in CHAPTER 2, the main findings focused around the disproportionate populations of certain groups in low tracked classes (i.e., racial and ethnic minorities and/or children with disabilities) and how students were placed into track levels. While the current study’s participants did not talk about such things, there are certainly unforeseen consequences to tracking and, as cited from these court cases, legal ramifications to tracking. While ability grouping is the primary motivation of tracking, with ability as the most relevant factor in placement decisions (see the principle of equal treatment), we must also consider the other consequences of tracking that, even if not intentional, have acquired legal
backing. Perhaps the definition of “ability” in this study helps to show that IQ and test scores are only one portion of deciding a student’s track level (see Definitions of Terms in CHAPTER 1). An individual’s motivation, extracurricular activities, and work ethic also come into play in deciding a person’s ability level.

**Student Voice and Tracking**

Allowing student voices to be heard was a primary goal of this study. While what the students said was analyzed in CHAPTERS 5 and 6, I must return to the students again. Here, comparing and contrasting the student voice to the tracking literature previously presented in CHAPTER 2 provides a link to learning that is not yet realized.

**Reasons to Not Detrack**

Two reasons to detrack a curriculum where tracking occurs were given (Hallinan, 1994; Wells & Serna, 1996). First, detracking creates diversity of learning styles/student ability levels in a class, which is an effective teaching technique. Secondly, detracking promotes challenging courses to students. The participants outright refuted these suggestions. Participants in every track level said that their non-tracked classes contained too wide a range of abilities. Teachers ended up teaching to the low ability students, thus leaving the majority of students to busy themselves while others were learning. Or, teachers taught to the middle level, which allowed the high ability students to drift and the low ability students to struggle. All participants appreciated tracked classes. In some regard, students prefer tracking to course content, meaning they would choose a less interesting tracked course over a more interesting non-tracked course.

**Demographics**

Some race, gender, and class disproportions were discussed in CHAPTER 2 to show the rest of the story once tracking is imposed. Earlier in this chapter, the discussion about
motivating factors reminded us of how the participants viewed their track level as being
organized by ability level. Nonetheless, the participants said little of these demographic
disproportions when given the chance to do so. Students do not feel negatively manipulated by
the tracking system.

One honors student said that there were mostly females in that track, and a low-tracked
participant mentioned how males outnumber girls. A middle-tracked participant said that she
tires of the snotty, rich kids in the town; this thought was not related to track level, per say. So
while the participants did not clearly articulate demographic disproportions, I think it remains an
administrator’s duty to address these issues. As stated earlier, while tracking is nonconsequential
we need to alert ourselves to the consequences of tracking, including possible overrepresentation
of racial minorities, males, or students of low socio-economic status in low tracks.

Access to the Future

Oakes (1986) blamed tracking for widening the educational gap between high and low
achieving students. Gamoran (1987) said the tracking system lifts the high tracked students
while keeping low students at the bottom, in regard to college access and income potential. The
participants disagreed. They felt properly placed in their track because the particular track
complemented their future plans. This finding was previously thought to be the case in gifted
programs only (Feldhusen & Dai, 1997). Both low tracked participants in the present study felt
encouraged by their school experience, not hindered by it. They embraced their spot in tracking
because the tailored learning fit their needs. With one of these boys attending a community
college for a career in Plumbing and Heating and the other boy attending the military so that he
can later pay for a four-year degree, their plans sound as strong as the other higher tracked
participants.
If anything, tracking does not widen the educational gap; tracking raises educational achievement for all players. To those who think that the educational gap will lessen via our interference with the curriculum structure, I say the following: there will always be an educational gap. That is part of human nature. Our goal should be to raise everyone’s achievement levels—not to make all students equal.

The college application process received a lot of comments from the participants. Regardless of track level, the application process was seen as something that occurs outside of school. No participant received any meaningful help from a guidance counselor or principal. Only English teachers sometimes lent a hand with an application essay.

Contrary to the findings of Venezia and Kirst (2005) who said that higher tracked students were more prepared for college application activities, the present study’s participants all said that the college application process is confusing. The only help that students received was from parents or older siblings who had gone through this process. Furthermore, the participants said that tracking does not help or inhibit choices about college because their minds were made up about college prior to any track influence, thus conflicting with the findings of Rosenbaum (1980).

To combat the difficulties with the college application process, Venezia and Kirst (2005) recommended that teachers be the ones in school to disseminate this type of information. The present study’s participants would agree. Students regularly turned to the teachers they respect and trust for all sorts of reasons. The participants could not rely on guidance counselors for application assistance because of their unfamiliarity, lack of access, and general uncomfortable feelings about them. Students turned to their teachers for help.
College admissions procedures are not about tracking. Application to college is about parenting and families. If students in low tracks go to college less often, perhaps they have prepared themselves for the future in different ways. These same kids, if placed in a higher track, would still have the same career goals. Switching tracks is not going to change a person’s life that much. Plus, of the middle and high tracked kids who plan to attend college, I wonder how many of them stick to their original plan and gain a college degree.

Peers and Friendships in Tracked Classes

The participants all thought that they learned best with like-minded peers. In every track level, students felt more comfortable around students with similar abilities and interests. They learned better when other class members showed a sense of encouragement. Thus, Zimmer’s (2003) contribution that tracking is beneficial for the peer effect impact on learning was supported.

Agne (1999) contended that when students are grouped homogeneously by ability, they participate more during class time than when grouped heterogeneously. The participants agreed. They also expressed that it is easy to make friends in school when students share multiple courses each year. It appeared to the participants that tracking helped students feel comfortable in class. The participants were careful to point out that tracking does not establish cliques. Rather, students associate themselves with people whom they feel comfortable around. While others may think that the participants are “talking in circles”, the participants truly felt that friendships were created independently of tracking. Also, while others may attribute clique-building to tracking, the participants deny this to be the case.
Mobility

Hallinan (1996) and Lucas and Good (2001) discussed how mobility within tracking is limited for certain students. However, from what the participants said, mobility in their school’s track system was possible in any grade and especially in the later grades. The mobility points are good ones. When track mobility is there, more justice favoring individual rights is present. When limited mobility was perceived in the literature (Hallinan; Lucas & Good; Oakes, 1986) injustice arose from those thoughts. So, in order to ensure for justice in tracking, mobility needs to be a key component.

It was difficult to find participants who met one of the study’s criteria of staying on the same track level for four years in English and math because a lot of mobility was in place at the school. As I was gathering information to find out who met the study’s criteria that also included an age restriction of 18 years or older and graduating on time, I learned many things from the graduating class that numbered 330 students. First, few students were on a strictly honors track level. Many English honors students were not that great in math, or vice versa. Some honors students chose to change tracks at some point during high school in at least one honors course.

Similarly, of 300 classmates, only a few students were on the low track in English and math for four years. Several students were near the study’s criteria but deviated from the low track at some point, especially during the junior year when students attempted a higher tracked class only to return to the low track their senior year. Other low tracked students transferred to the local vocational school.

Student Achievement

Dismantling the track system was thought to academically benefit the lower groups while hurting students in the upper groups (Argys, Rees & Brewer, 1996; Kulik & Kulik, 1982).
However, the participants in the present study quite vehemently explained that everyone would
be hurt if tracking was taken away. When students are ability grouped, they are placed in classes
with students that have a similar academic achievement level, which produces growth in the
classroom. The participants explained that tracking helps their achievement. Agne (1999) found
that in tracked classes, the motivation and pace of instruction increased as compared to non-
tracked classes. My participants agreed with Agne’s findings. Also, in the way that “ability”
was defined in CHAPTER 1, we now know more about how ability is measured in ways beyond
IQ and tests scores.

**Satisfaction**

Satisfaction with tracking appeared high for all participants—not just those students in
the upper tracks, as previously measured quantitatively (Vanfossen, et al., 1987). I find it
difficult to mathematically measure satisfaction. That is why I asked the participants to talk
about their satisfaction with tracking and how it affected their overall high school experience.
By giving them an opportunity to be heard, the participants expressed that they were not only
satisfied with tracking, they preferred it.

**Teacher Impact**

Teachers impact students more than any influence of the tracking system. The
participants talked constantly about their teachers, both the good and bad. The participants
explained that their respected, prepared teachers were the true leaders of the school. The people
who work within the track system have a remarkable influence on students and how they view
themselves (Rubie-Davies, 2006), yet the literature about tracking rarely focuses on the teachers
who ultimately represent and implement the school curriculum.
The participants enjoyed challenging teachers and dreaded boredom. This should not be a surprise. However, much literature about tracking was conducted by researchers at the college level. It may take a seasoned high school teacher to simplify what really happens in high school. Veteran teachers who care about their students know what they are thinking and can create learning opportunities (Noddings, 1992). Teachers take the pulse of the school each day. An anecdote says that when teachers want to find out what is happening in the school, ask your students. If the class becomes boring, students will tell the teacher. According to the participants an effective teacher needs to first be a good listener and then get involved in school activities outside of the classroom walls so as to connect with students.

Even though the participants were tracked throughout high school, they did not feel tracked in individual classrooms because of their teachers. The participants’ teachers taught multiple track levels in most cases. For example, there was no single honors English or math teacher per grade level. The participants felt that since teachers taught multiple track levels it provided freshness to the whole tracking system. Within the individual classroom, there were still students of varying abilities. However, the range of abilities was much closer than in non-tracked classes. The participants wholeheartedly agreed with the belief that caring teachers are the ones who meet students at their individual ability level to promote learning and growth (Lumpkin, 2007).

To conclude this section, the student voices and their opinions of tracking must be acted upon. Listening is not enough. While teenagers have their fickle moments, form groups of friends, change friends, and grow as individuals, let us see tracking for what it is not. Tracking is not a primary or even secondary influence on kids. Students are students. Tracking is tracking. Caring teachers stand in the spotlight as most responsible for student learning, but the
participants embraced tracking, said that they benefited from it, and thought it a huge injustice if tracking was abolished. Getting rid of tracking would be a disservice to students. Doing away with tracking means not listen to what the participants said. Ensuring that tracking is just, allows for mobility, and is based upon the individual’s growth means that the student voice matters in school curriculum decision-making activities.

Leadership Practice Implications

How shall we govern ourselves with tracking as the system of delivering the curriculum? As discussed earlier, the participants could not describe a principal’s job duties, nor did they discuss any link between tracking and school leaders. Turning now to implications, the administrator’s role is highlighted. Then, my voice as the researcher will further explain some implications for school leaders.

Administrator’s Role

Those who practice the art of school leadership must paint with a student-borrowed brush. We cannot forget the students in our schools. Providing formal arenas for students to communicate with administrators is essential. However, those daily opportunities such as in the hall or lunchroom are equally valid ways for a principal to promote an open style of communication. Only once the communication lines with students are opened can any meaningful exchanges take place.

One participant mentioned that she served on a student advisory board, where a few students met monthly with a school principal. The meetings were held in a conference room during lunchtime. Unfortunately, she mentioned that the meetings really did nothing. While she acknowledged the principal’s effort, she did not see results of those meetings other than the principal gaining some information about the current school climate. Therefore, when
principal/student interaction takes place, it must *do* something in the eyes of students. Listening is the precursor to action, with action as the evidence that listening occurred.

Since the participants did not know what principals do during the day, there is an obvious disconnect. Principals are, perhaps, the busiest workers in a school because they handle so many different things—from teacher issues to a leaking roof and everything in between. Students are not ignorant; they just do not know. Nor should principals need to justify their jobs to students. However, when principals implement programs that lead to the student voice being acted upon, students may react differently. All of this is a relationship issue. Administrators need to get out there and forge ways for students to connect with them.

I suggest a revolving student senate where different students at different times participate in decision-making activities. In reflection of Kohlberg’s “Just Community” and idea of “moral musical chairs” (Power et al., 1989; Schrader, 1993) students are invited to attend an arena that provides communication with administrators and encourages their own moral growth, all while benefiting the student body. Going beyond the set up of an advisory council, the student senate members change so as to include a wide range of students throughout the year.

Another implication is geared toward district-level and building-level administrators. The ethic of justice needs to be used more as an evaluation tool of school practices. This lens ultimately captures if students’ needs are being met and how those needs are met. The ethic of justice with aid from the ethic of critique helps expose problems with systems, especially related to justice. However, in using the ethic of justice as an evaluation tool, the issues that are seemingly unrelated to justice (but are actually an element of justice) emerge.

An additional implication may be to dismantle the 5.0 GPA system for honors classes and institute a 4.0 system for everyone. Doing so will result in many changes. First, fewer students
will choose the honors track, thus leaving only those people who truly want the challenge to learn. Thus, the mediocre honors students will not be able to take advantage of a heightened GPA not due to them. Second, the justice questions within such a grading system will be fixed because all students of every track level will have the same reward for good grades. Third, a 4.0 GPA system will likely level some existing scrutiny toward members of differing track levels.

Since participants talked so much about the influence of teachers, then another implication of this study is to explore hiring practices and teacher assignments to courses and tracks. In most cases, newly hired teachers learn the procedures of the school and support them. However, it may be more important to consider the personality and communication ability of job applicants. While the qualifications of a person are important, the person’s ability to communicate with students and coworkers is also an important role. If the job application process is geared too strongly the wrong way, then people are hired who promote neither student justice nor justice in school procedures.

The ultimate implication of this study is to investigate the state of tracking in schools today. If curriculum design is not regularly critiqued, then it becomes flawed due to the times, governmental influence, and changing students.

The Researcher’s Voice

While some of my opinions have already been expressed, my professional history definitely impacts my beliefs. I taught high school English from 1995-2005 and was deeply involved in extracurricular activities such as coaching and class advisory. As a gauge for what students thought of me as a teacher I provide the following information. Each year I was nominated multiple times by students for the Who’s Who Among America’s Teachers award. I was invited many times each year to graduation parties. Students come back to see me after
leaving high school. I have written countless letters of recommendation and even more personal
e-mails to former students and athletes who asked for my professional advice.

I mention these things to show myself as a respected, trusted teacher. As I have accepted
school administrative responsibilities already, I believe that my professional history coupled with
the support of students have driven me to this research study. Plus I believe that my opinions
rest on solid, student-centered ground.

Like the present study’s participants, I see how teachers have more influence on students
than principals. Those people who were respected teachers make better principals than others
who did not teach. Phrased differently, only former teachers who listened and acted upon the
student voice during teaching years should become principals. I believe that it is the student
gauge that decides whether or not a teacher should become a school administrator. Plus, the
experience of working effectively as a colleague with a diverse staff solidifies an ability to lead
within a school.

I am an advocate of tracking with the salient feature being ability level. I further believe
in providing a balance of instruction. There are other things that need to be in place in a school
that implements a tracked curriculum. Namely, inclusion/special education resource rooms,
extracurricular clubs for each content area, and a strong arts program help to round out a
student’s educational experience. It is incumbent upon school leaders to provide a well-rounded
school curriculum, starting with implementing tracking as this study suggests.

One job that principals undertake each spring is to create the master schedule for the
coming year. Part of that process is deciding what teachers teach which classes. Many factors
come into play here including the skill level of the teacher, personality, attendance record, and
contribution to other school functions, such as supplemental contracts for coaching and advising.
Preferential treatment is sometime granted to veteran teachers and coaches. I understand that when teachers participate in school events beyond the classroom, those teachers may earn a right to teach classes of their choice, more so than teachers who only attend school from bell to bell.

That being said, a principal should carefully choose the teachers for the varying track levels. Coaches and teachers who are involved in school activities are sometimes the school’s best teachers. However, veteran teachers are automatically given honors classes whereas newly hired teachers are given the low tracked classes. I have heard veteran teachers say, “I taught low classes for years and earned the right to teach honors students.” Or, “let the new teacher teach the low kids.” On the contrary, I think that the best teachers in a school ought to teach the low tracked classes. State test scores may impact my thinking because many students who have not passed the state tests are low tracked. Therefore, the teachers who can best help low ability students to learn and pass the required graduation tests ultimately are helping those kids to succeed by graduating.

The issue of teacher assignment could be placed in a discussion about resource allocation (Rawls, 1958). How shall administrators distribute their teachers? Again, I suggest that when a specific group of students needs veteran, successful teachers, then the administrator should assign courses to teachers accordingly.

What classes should new teachers teach? I recommend middle track levels and high track levels for the first few years. It is not a secret that honors and middle tracked students behave differently in class than low ability students. If a new teacher can focus more on instruction and less on class management in their first few years of teaching, perhaps we can assuage the teacher turnover to other professions within five years. Once new teachers practice their teaching style
with upper-end students, they will be more successful in teaching low tracked classes in later years.

There are some things that I know now upon the study’s completion that I had not realized before. College prep/middle tracked students are comfortable with tracking, which is contrary to my original speculations. Since I taught grades 9, 10, and 12 in all track levels at some point in my career, I always thought that the middle-of-the-road learners were quite unaffected or even lost within tracking, as if they did not matter. It seemed in my experience that the high and low tracked students were always in a spotlight. The honors students were praised, while consternation grew when considering the low tracked kids. With such a drive toward state test scores, the low tracked students were always the target of intervention. The middle tracked participants in the present study readjusted my views.

Also, I had previously suspected that course expectations were different according to track level. The participants corrected my thinking. They reminded me that expectations were high in each level. Sure, there were differences, such as honors students being expected to write longer research papers with more sources than low tracked students. However, inside the classroom, the challenge to succeed given the class expectations proved to be tailored to ability level. In essence, low tracked kids are still challenged, even though the actual expectations when compared to other tracks are different.

Also, I stand corrected on my guess as to where students would place tracking on the ethic of justice spectrum. Based on a paper that I wrote prior to this study, I had concluded that tracking served the greater good. The participants in the present study explained in vivid detail that tracking involves more individual choice and respect for individual rights and needs than I had imagined. In mulling over this difference, I now see that while tracking is an individual
notion, the collection of individuals as a whole include a lot of people. Tracking has the potential to serve the greater good but is not motivated by the greater good. One sentence that cleared my mind was stated earlier when I wrote that just because tracking works for a collection of individuals does not make it geared toward the greater good.

In CHAPTER 1 some disconnect between tracking and No Child Left Behind was proposed. To return to that thought now, tracking changes the educational bar for everyone, according to their skill level. Regardless of track level, the content and methods of instruction are similar, but the difference occurs in the ultimate achievement level per track. Chances are that the tracking system does not assist NCLB standards. Since NCLB encourages for all to reach the same bar of education, it suggests that high tracked kids can stop learning, middle tracked kids can pass a state test and then wander, while low tracked kids must catch up. The teachers within the track system will attempt to avoid this confusion by teaching students appropriately.

Sometimes, tracking was blamed in the 1980s for causing too many problems for students (Oakes, 1985). However, my participants had previously formed opinions and beliefs about themselves and classmates, which occurred separately from the track system. Rather than blaming tracking, leaders should recognize and respect the differences among learners.

During the interviews, participants were asked to rate the importance of track level with seven other aspects of schooling. Track level, personal work ethic, amount of homework, friends, hand picking your schedule, teacher ability, and parent influence were the schooling aspects. While they all rated track level as rather unimportant, a reversal to the original interview question creates some interesting discussion. If “track level” was taken away and the “absence of tracking” was an aspect to be rated, I think that the participants would rate “absence
of tracking” very high in importance. Stated differently, if students who were tracked were asked to rate the importance of tracking being taken away, I think that the students would think of the absence of tracking as an important matter.

At times, participants said that tracking was unimportant, yet their specific statements indicated otherwise. Similarly, they sometimes claimed that tracking did not make an impact on their high school experience, even when their comments revealed that it did. In the end, it appeared that tracking made more of an impact on students than they realized. To account for these perception differences, I attempted at all times to report the student perception, not the perception of myself or other adults. That the participants’ perceptions were sometimes contradictory speaks to how tracking happens behind-the-scenes of students’ lives.

Many aspects of education fall into a category that I call “relationships”. There are personal relationships that develop all around the school. Teachers care about students. Students care about respected teachers. More often than not, students care about their learning. As we evaluate our school programs and policies, it is equally important to evaluate ourselves. When solid working relationships are in place within a school, good things are going to happen. Student friendships resulted from any class, especially when students had many of the same peers in multiple classes. I had inaccurately guessed that the middle tracked students did not forge the deep friendships with classmates that students in other tracks did. The most effective leaders should promote the building of relationships among all who attend the school, from students to adult personnel.

Recommendations for Future Research

Had this study been developed differently, other results may have emerged. I suggest a longitudinal study to investigate tracking experiences and how they change over time in high
school. This type of study could include students who switched tracks and what happens. A segment of track mobility would be appropriate to include in a longitudinal study. Also, students who move into the district may share how former curriculum structure impacts coming into a tracked system. Likewise, I suspect that some differences among schools would emerge, such as the middle track in one school being similar to an honors track in another school. Another suggestion is to compare tracked students’ perceptions with non-tracked students’ perspectives.

I am also curious as to how students might respond in a school where the tracking structure was detracked (or vice versa) at some point. Including participants who had been in both a tracked and non-tracked structure would prove to reveal useful data. Another way to further the research is to focus on different areas of tracking such as, (1) views of tracking by content area, (2) views of differing grade levels, (3) teachers in a tracked system, (4) special education and tracking, or (5) views of tracking three years after high school and how perspectives of tracking evolve over time.

CHAPTER 4 of this paper can contribute to future research by serving as an example of how data are transformed in qualitative research. The data transformation activities cited here are not solely for use in phenomenology. Case studies, life histories, and ethnographies all require a component of data transformation. Following the suggestions and thought processes that I have provided may assist future researchers.

Furthermore, the ethic of justice needs to be used more often as a leadership or theoretical framework in future research studies. The ethic of justice can evaluate the justice in school policies other than tracking. It provides the necessary backbone by serving as a guide when moral and ethical dilemmas emerge. In addition to moral dilemmas, the ethic of justice can assist when examining issues such as governance and allocation of resources (Starratt 1991). As
a tool, it produces results other than those ideas related strictly to justice. The ethic of justice provides evaluation on many levels and is grounded in enough theory to handle difficult scenarios or policies (Starratt, 1988; Starratt, 1995).

One way to learn from an ethical dilemma is to bring in multiple voices to test the dilemma. I recommend that focus groups be organized for the purpose of faculty and student learning to occur simultaneously. When different, oftentimes opposing, voices meet in an arena meant for discussion, moral growth occurs for everyone involved (Kohlberg, 1984).

Lastly, future school research needs to be conducted with a student-centered, qualitative approach. Student voice provides a powerful real-life reminder about who is affected by an administrator’s decision (O’Shea, 2006). The student voice is the appropriate recorder of what happens after programs are implemented and changed. A qualitative design encourages the voice to emerge naturally and openly. A student-centered approach to research provides accurate answers to the most difficult questions.

Conclusion

The power of student voice has now been included in a discussion that involves tracking, justice, and leadership. We should celebrate the views of our students because they reflect our decisions as school leaders. A student-centered approach to leadership pairs nicely with tracking because they both contain a respect for individual rights.
REFERENCES


*Larry P. v. Riles,* 793 F.2d 969 (9th Cir. 1984).


APPENDIX A

Letter of Consent

May 4, 2007

Dear Student,

You are invited to be in a research study about your high school experience and the classes you took. The research study is for my dissertation, which is part of my graduate student work on a doctoral degree in education through the Leadership Studies program at Bowling Green State University. The purpose of this study is to show what graduating seniors say about their school curriculum. This study asks if “tracking” has affected your overall high school experience. “Tracking” is also known as ability grouping and refers to class labels like “honors, college prep and general education”.

Participating in this study means joining me for two one-on-one interviews. I think that both interviews will take place within two weeks, and each interview should last about an hour. The interviews will take place in the high school building. I have been given permission by the school leaders. Also, this study requests one follow-up interview. In the follow-up you will see the results and be able to clear up your earlier responses. I will guess that the follow-up interview will take place two weeks after your second interview. The estimated total amount of time for your participation is a few hours over the span of about one month. I will interview a total of six seniors who are at least age 18 and graduating on time.

The anticipated risks to you are no greater than those normally found in daily life. This study may benefit you by having you think about how class structure (tracking) is part of your whole school experience. This study gives you a voice. Students are rarely asked for their responses about how high school classes are structured.

Anything that you provide will remain confidential. Your identity will not be revealed. I will protect your identity by assigning a pseudonym in place of your real name. Also, any documents that could reveal your identity, including this letter, will remain in my possession only and will be locked up away from the school. I may use direct quotes from your interviews, but your identity will be protected.

The audio of the interviews will be digitally recorded. There will be no hard copy tapes of the interviews. Audio files of the interviews will be transferred from the recorder to a computer. A transcriber may hear your interview as the audio file gets typed into transcript form. Other than the transcriber, no other person besides me will hear your interviews. Audio files saved to the computer will be safely stored for a period of two years. Then they will be destroyed.

Your participation in this study is your choice. A decision to participate or not participate will have no impact on your grades, class standing, or relationship with your school, your teachers, or
with me. You can refrain from answering any questions without penalty. You may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time. By signing this paper, you are giving your consent to participate in the study.

There are three people that you can contact if you have questions or concerns. The person conducting this study and interviewing you is Robert Falkenstein (419-874-3181 ext. 25182; falker@bgsu.edu). My Dissertation Chair is Dr. Patrick Pauken (419-372-2550; paukenp@bgsu.edu). Also, you may contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University’s Human Subjects Review Board (419-372-7719; hsrb@bgsu.edu). I will provide you with a copy of this consent letter so that you have the contact information.

I agree to participate in the study. I have been informed that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time.

_______________________________
Print Participant’s Name

_______________________________
Participant’s Signature

_______________________________
Date
APPENDIX B

Round One Interview Questions

1. Explain whether or not you have liked high school.
2. Throughout high school, have you liked or disliked your English and math classes? Explain why or why not.
3. What types of homework assignments are most common in English and math?
4. How many hours per week did you spend on homework in English and math?
5. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being completely satisfied, how satisfied are you with your English and math classes? Why did you rate them this way?
6. Explain whether or not you had to put forth effort to learn. That is, were you challenged in English and math?
7. Explain why you think that your classmates liked or disliked your particular English and math classes?

I will say to the participants, “For the following questions, ‘track level’ refers to honors classes, college prep classes or general education classes.”

8. What discussions take place among classmates about your English and math classes?
9. What discussions take place among classmates about your track level?
10. What discussions in the school take place about tracking in general?
11. What do you think about your own track level when considering all three levels? How do you feel about being in your current track level?
12. What do you think about the track level of others?
13. How do you think others in your same track level perceive your track level?
14. How do you think others in different track levels view your track level?
15. What expectations do you think that your English and math teachers have of students in your track level?
16. Do you think that tracking contributes to “cliques” in the school? Explain.
17. What is your plan for next fall? How prepared are you for the next step, whether college or other plans?
18. Throughout your high school experience, did you get prepared for the college application process? If anyone helped you prepare for applying to college, who was it?
19. What are your future plans beyond next fall? In 2 years? In 5 years? In 10 years?
20. Do you feel that you have been given choices about what classes to take in high school or do you feel like a bystander in the scheduling process? Explain.
21. Is tracking as a procedure/process fair?
22. Has tracking helped you to improve yourself or has it “kept you down”?
23. Overall, how satisfied were you with your English and math classes?
24. Overall, how satisfied were you with your high school experience? What things contributed to your satisfaction or dissatisfaction with high school?
APPENDIX C

Peer Review of Codes

Note: bulleted items are themes and asterisked items are themes based on an implication of the interviewee track (high, middle or low track).

a- Academics

b- Wealth

c- Course selection
  - Upperclassmen get more choice with electives
  - Art and music electives were possible to take and the most sought after electives
  - Core courses are set as requirements for all tracks
  - Electives viewed as fun, but core courses are viewed simply as requirements
  - Desire to continue learning (taking more difficult classes) even though core course requirements met
  - Some courses are not offered for honors or are offered but have a teacher or curriculum that’s overly difficult; thus, students may not take these courses
  - Teaching professions course is fun and applicable to life
    * Lower track may see fate as course predictor versus self-empowered free will
    * Elitist or superior 5.0/AP perspective both from those in and those wanting to be in such courses

d- Experience and extracurriculars
  - A lot of enjoyment from extracurriculars makes it an impactful part of the high school experience
  - Extracurriculars allow for socializing that doesn’t occur in the classroom
  - Being overinvolved is overwhelming and stressful, thus leading to burnout
  - Some people sign up for extracurriculars to put on their college application or but don’t truly participate fully
  - Overall, high school is a good experience.
  - Band is an enjoyable extracurricular and learning experience

e- School social life

f- Good teachers/like class
  - Students enjoy the course and learn more when they like the teacher
  - When the teacher works hard, the student works hard; when the teacher doesn’t put forth effort, neither does the student.
  - Students enjoy talking with teachers and getting to know them.
  - Math program is excellent in caliber at all tracking levels.
  - Math dept. prepares students well for future tests: ACT and AP
  - English classes were liked
g- Bad teachers/disliked class
  • It’s more difficult to like a class when you don’t like the teacher.
  • It’s more difficult to get motivated to work in a class when you don’t like the teacher.
  • When teachers don’t care, students don’t care.
  • Unprepared and apathetic teachers waste student time
  • Sometimes students could do work at the last minute or not at all and still pass, especially in 9th grade

h- Tough class

i- Teacher personality

j- English assignments/homework
  • Liking or not liking to read affects English course enjoyment and success
  • Most English classes read a lot (poems, novels and short stories) with the focus on analyzing symbols and deciphering meaning
  • Most English classes wrote research papers

k- Time spent on English

l- English tough

m- English easy

n- English rating
  • English gets an 8 on a scale of 10
  • Most students enjoyed English except humanities students
  • Students enjoyment of reading seemed the basis for a higher or lower rating.

o- Math assignments/homework
  • Math includes a lot of bookwork
  • More student learning required because of homework (book and worksheets)
  • Each teacher has his/her own structure for the week, often including notes, practice (book or worksheets) then quizzes and sometimes review

p- Time spent on math

q- Math tough

r- Math easy

s- Math rating

T- Math concepts build over time
u- College application and plans for college
- Guidance counselors don’t get back to students readily
- Students don’t feel prepared to fill out college applications
- Those who had teachers who went over typical college essays appreciated it and felt more prepared to answer college application essays
- PHS appears to be a feeder school for BGSU

v- Future
- Want to get married, have a solid career
- Care more about liking the job than the earning potential of the job
  * In 5 years, upper and college tracks see themselves in college and graduate school
  * In 5 years, lower track sees themselves working

w- Own perception of other tracks
- Honors students are expected and used to taking notes during discussion
- Those in an honors track may be looked down upon
- People in lower tracks are perceived as not caring about school or their future
- Honors classes focus more on challenging learning in a structured atmosphere
- Some believe lower tracked students would be proud of themselves if they were content with their tracking niche and made the best of it by accepting it and working to the best of their ability.
- If you can take honors then you should challenge yourself with the increased workload and academic challenges that will better prepare you
- When classes are mixed tracked classes, those who are typically in the higher track look down upon and are frustrated by those that are typically in the lower track or are perceived as being in the lower track.
- Tracking is not talked about openly much, but belittling comments are made by all tracks behind closed doors or in the company of their friends of the same track.

x- Own perception of own tracks
  * Those in lower tracks are cognizant that the pace is slower and okay with that because breaking down the material facilitates learning
  * Those in college prep track are content with their placement
  * Those in upper tracks feel competitive pressure, both among their peers and within themselves, although they are proud of their placement
  * In mixed tracked classes such as humanities, there appeared to be no positive feedback about any track in the class.

y- Other’s perception of tracks
- General comments about how each track is viewed consider each track viewed equally except for honors which is viewed as more challenging and having students into learning
- Specifically, lower track students feel others view their track as easy and dumb
- Specifically, honors track students feel they’re viewed as arrogant overachievers and geeks
- Specifically, college prep students view themselves as fairly equal to honors
z- Discussions
- Getting help with homework that was not understood
- Weekend/out of school plans
- Complaining about other teachers
- Catching up on homework that was not completed

cc- fairness
- Having a 5.0 scale is unfair for the college prep students who work hard but will never receive anything beyond a 4.0
- It’s too difficult to move into the honors track
- Courses should be tracked in order so students get the kind of help or challenge they need
- Standardized tests are not fair, but they may assist with track placement
  * Honors students feel they are justly and rightfully due the 5.0 compensation for working hard and doing more difficult work
  * Honors students believe they should not be lowered to college prep level standards
  * College prep students believe they are seen as less as a person and not as intellectually gifted when separated from honors although they’d like the opportunity to compete because they believe it would improve their performance.
  * Low track students feel they are advised into particular classes although with some free will, but they state that because not everyone is at the same level, tracking may be necessary.

ee- friends
- Students socialize in their track because they spend the day with the same basic group of people while the other half feels they hang out with whomever they like devoid of tracking placements.
- Those who felt they socialize with others in their track believe they limit their possible friendships because of the comfort zone with those they are used to seeing daily, thus making them less social with “outsiders.”
- Drinking is not necessary in order to have fun
- Those outside of honors don’t have friends in honors classes
- Our classes don’t contribute to cliques; however, they limit those with whom you socialize.
- Easier to talk with those in the same track

gg- Student effort
- Many students don’t start working hard until junior year. This leads to regret about the first years of high school and unfulfilled potential, but also self-respect and appreciation for difficult classes that encourage learning and good work habits during the later high school years, especially junior year
- Students appreciate and use extra tutoring, whether peer or teacher
- If you don’t put in much effort, you won’t get much out of it
- It’s so difficult to fail that students must choose to fail
• Nobody wants others to know they are working hard and studying because saying one worked hard then failing leads to embarrassment and shame
• You just have to do the work
• Many students did not put forth a lot of effort freshmen year due to ignorance about the need to and/or the ability to get by without doing so

**ii- teacher expectations**
• Some teachers expect more from students, not just in terms of work finished but even more so in the quality of work
• Many teachers allow extra credit and late credit, which appears to be a student perceived crutch for students versus the teachers for whom work must be handed in on time or not accepted at all.
• English, and especially math, teachers push students hard
• Teachers have faith that students can push themselves and achieve more
• Students are too spoonfed in 7-9th grades that they don’t know how to learn independently

**tt- family**

**uu- academic preparation for college**
• Facilities such as library and labs were available and helpful
• Support system was not guidance but teachers and case managers
• Except for classes taught by Mr. Asmus, science classes have not prepared students for college
• Some English classes write research papers and others don’t, but those who did felt the research paper prepared them well for college
• Trigonometry prepared students well but statistics did not

**zz- personal views**
• Sophomore year appears to be a year in which students change, especially emotionally
• Religious upbringing leads to better moral decisions
APPENDIX D

Round Two Interview Questions

1. What influence does your track level have in your life? Socially? Academically?
2. What are the top three or so things that have affected your high school experience?
3. Could you have changed tracks if you wanted to?
4. Based on your academic performance in high school, that is your grades, if you could do it all over again and pick your track level, where would you put yourself?
5. In your first interview, you seemed to indicate that tracking does not establish cliques. So if this is the case, what does establish cliques?
6. What percentage of your friends are in your track level? Percentage outside your track?
7. What would happen to you if students of all track levels were housed in the same classes?
8. How would you define ‘great teacher’?
9. How would you define ‘poor teacher’?
10. There are many types of instruction that teachers initiate in class. What are the most valuable types of learning for you?
11. What would you suggest to get better prepared for writing college applications?
12. Respond to the following statement: My track level prepared me for college. Explain.
13. What grade were you in when you realized your track placement?
14. Place the following aspects of schooling into order of importance for having a positive high school experience: 1. friends 2. track level 3. teacher ability 4. being able to hand pick your class schedule 5. personal work ethic 6. amount of homework 7. parent influence

1 is most important and 7 is least important

Friends____

Track level____

Teacher ability____

Being able to hand pick your schedule____

Personal work ethic____

Amount of homework____

Parent influence____

15. Respond to the following statement: Teachers have a lot to do with your effort in a class.
16. Respond to the following statement: Whether or not you like English has a lot to do with whether or not you like to read.
17. Who are the adult leaders in the school?
18. In round one, nothing was mentioned about administrators. Why do you think that is the case?
19. To your knowledge, what are a principal’s main job duties?

20. Rate your 4 years by level of difficulty—9, 10, 11, 12. Why?
   1 is most difficult; 4 is least difficult
   
   Grade 9 _____
   Grade 10 _____
   Grade 11 _____
   Grade 12 _____

21. Rate your 4 years by level of enjoyment—9, 10, 11, 12. Why?
   1 is most enjoyed; 4 is least enjoyed
   
   Grade 9 _____
   Grade 10 _____
   Grade 11 _____
   Grade 12 _____

22. What influence does pace of instruction have on your academic performance in non-tracked classes?

23. Is the pace of instruction suitable for your learning in tracked classes?

24. Is GPA a driving issue for you? Why or why not?

25. How might track level and GPA be related?

26. Anything else about tracking that you would like to say?

27. Anything else about your high school experience that you would like to say?
APPENDIX E

List of 17 Initial Themes

1. Teacher effort and personality affects students’ work ethic and effort in a class.

2. The overall high school experience includes an academic portion but is largely consumed by extra activities such as sports, clubs, band, church groups and the like.

3. Math is difficult because it builds upon previously learned concepts; it is also rigorous in that the same process is done each week….learn/test/review

4. Enjoyment of English class is not related to liking to read. There are many other aspects of the class that contribute to enjoying English class. Reading poetry is different than reading novels.

5. Students are academically prepared for college but due to age and experience must learn to adapt to ‘living/life’ in college, which is generally learned at home from parents.

6. Students use family resources to complete college applications and learn about what college entails. Teachers sometimes contribute their thoughts, especially when writing college application essays. However, students think that ‘by now’ they should be able to complete a college application on their own.

7. Students perceive their own track level as appropriate based on types of learning, pace, content, and friendships.

8. Students do not powerfully view other track levels or think anything strongly about them with one twist: honors students sometimes think that college prep student view them as elitist. SHEEP example….also ‘retarded’ example was “others view of your own track” which turns out to be an inaccurate guess of what others think.

9. Tracking does not contribute to cliques. Cliques are established by factors such as 1) how people spend their time—in sports, partying, 2) people who grow up near each other and have known each other a long time, even if the friendship doesn’t grow until HS years, and (3) how people dress, as perceived by others outside of that group.

   NOTE: This is from a student perspective. Adults may think otherwise. Just because your friends are in your track does not make tracking the reason. Students are friends with others in their track long before the track system made any affect on it.

10. Students do not understand a principal’s role in the school unless you are a discipline case. Students feel removed from principals. The leaders of the school are specific teachers whom the students respect. The more personal contact that a student has with the principal, the more understanding of the principal him/herself is gained.
11. The 5.0 grading system is viewed as unfair to many students. However, they all agree that honors students should receive some type of reward (other than an extra GPA Point) for participating in honors. This may result in fewer honors students—leaving only those who truly want to learn.

12. Guidance counselors do not positively impact students and generally stand in the way of students rather than helping them. Guidance counselors are not timely in addressing a personal student need. GCs lack ways to inform students about colleges and admissions. There was a mandatory junior year meeting with GCs. GCs asked about college choice and major. Few resources or insightful suggestions were made. Only a student who makes a personal appointment might gain something. The meetings are uninformative.

13. Pace of instruction: perfect in tracked classes—expectations are known and students appreciate tailored pace for their ability level. In elective classes, students think the pace fluctuates too much or is either too fast or too slow.

14. Students rate grades 11 and 10 as most difficult.

15. Students rate the upper-class grades as more enjoyable than underclass grades.

16. Given a list of 7 different aspects of schooling to discuss according to importance, a student’s track level was not seen as important as 5 or 6 other variables (tracking was ranked 5th by 1 person and 6th or 7th by all others). The other variables were …. Friends, Teacher ability, Being able to hand pick your schedule, Personal work ethic, Parent influence, Amount of homework and track level

17. Tracking needs to stay. Students appreciate it and know what to expect. No one wants to see tracking abolished.