

6-2014

Minding the Gap: Analyzing the Role of Guidance Counselors in High School Ability Grouping

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Minding the Gap:
Analyzing the Role of Guidance Counselors
in High School Ability Grouping

By
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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
Honors in the Department of Sociology

Union College

March 2014

Abstract

UNDERBERGER, MARISA R. Minding the Gap: Analyzing the Role of Guidance Counselors in High School Ability Grouping. Department of Sociology, March 2014

This project investigates the role of the guidance counselor in high school tracking and ability grouping. Tracking and ability grouping are controversial topics among high schools because they can create a “school within a school” where the low-income-minority students are in lower tracks while the high-income white students are in the advanced classes. Scholars have debated if detracking, or heterogeneous grouping, is the answer, but the concern is that slower learners will hold advanced students back. When deciding which classes students should be enrolled in, teachers, parents, students, and guidance counselors all contribute their opinions. Guidance counselors play a crucial role in the scheduling process since they are the intermediary amongst students, parents, and teachers. Interviews were conducted with seven local high school guidance counselors from high, average, and low district needs-to-resources schools regarding their role in and opinions of tracking and ability grouping. Each counselor was interviewed at his or her school using a list of thirteen questions, with interviews lasting between thirty and forty-five minutes. While all of the counselors like their school’s tracking process overall, half of them would change aspects of their school’s grouping system. School-level socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity patterns often contributed to struggles within schools, such as parent involvement, graduation rates, daily attendance, and college enrollment. Contrary to prior research, none of the counselors would ever want their schools not to group students by ability, but two of the seven counselors do not feel tracking is necessary in high schools.

Acknowledgements

There are a few people who made this thesis possible. Their encouragement, time, and support motivated me each day and kept me smiling throughout this entire process.

I would like to thank the seven guidance counselors who allowed me to interview them. Your insights and opinions of tracking and ability grouping are fascinating and your honesty is greatly appreciated. Speaking to each of you reaffirmed my interest in one day becoming a school counselor. You are all truly an inspiration to me.

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Professor David Cotter. You helped me develop and implement a study that was both interesting and practical to my life. I appreciate your time that you devoted to me each week to help me write my thesis. You are the reason why I made it through this process.

I would like to thank my friends and family who listened to me talk about my thesis non-stop for six months, whether you wanted to hear it or not. You supported me every step of the way and constantly reassured me that everything is going to be okay.

There is really no amount of words to describe my deepest appreciation for each of you.
Thank You.

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Introduction

A flagpole. A mascot. A large billboard of sporting events, town meetings, and important dates. These are all symbols of a high school property. From the outside, most schools look the same. The first steps into a high school guidance office are also quite similar: college pennants covering the bulleting boards, financial aid pamphlets filling folders, stacks of student resources covering a counter, and the names of guidance counselors on office doors.

In a typical small Northeastern city sits an average size high school with great diversity. The school's top students, who are primarily white upper-class students, are enrolled in the majority of honors classes while African American and Latino students hang around in their regular level classes that they do not care for. The school appears to be divided into two: the upper-class college-bound white students in one school and the African American students who are barely passing their classes in the other school. Although these distinct groups are technically under the same roof, their high school experience will be drastically different.

Even though low-track African American students may want to be in more advanced classes, they often feel too defeated and intimidated to switch class levels. They do not want to be the only black student in an all white class, constantly being judged for their grades and class participation. Since students have been grouped by ability since middle school, by the time they get to high school, they become part of a community within their track. Low-track students, especially African American and Latino students, do not want to

leave the community they have been a part of for so many years and be picked on by their peers because they are taking a more advanced class.

On the other side of the town line is a suburban high school of little diversity. The school contains predominately upper-class students who all intend on going to college. They take the most advanced classes possible and work their hardest. Their teachers are passionate about their jobs and want to educate their hard working, dedicated, top-of-the-class students. Even if a student is in the least advanced class, he still works as hard as he can and is provided with outside resources within the school to help him. No students here are rejected and they all have big dreams and goals for after graduation.¹

The system the students in the high diversity urban school and the low diversity suburban school take part in is known as tracking. Tracking is the process of grouping of students by ability. It is the way students are sorted into classes based on a variety of factors, including: test scores, teacher recommendations, previous grades, and course prerequisites. Even though there are components that determine which classes students should take, the overall track system lacks a precise way of sorting students.

The most influential players in determining which classes students take are parents, teachers, students, and guidance counselors. Most students tend to discuss academics with their parents because students are the most comfortable with them. However, upper-class parents tend to be more involved and more knowledgeable of the education system than lower-class parents. Especially in this scenario, students will turn to their teachers for assistance. Teachers mostly focus on students' grades, behavior, and future plans when guiding them on which classes to take.

¹ This description is what scholars believe high schools look like on the inside. The research presented will show otherwise.

While students can make their own decisions on their class schedule, they do take their teachers', parents', and counselors' opinions into consideration. Whether or not students can take the classes they want to depends on course prerequisites, previous classes taken, and grades; these components could restrict students from taking the classes they want, forcing them to be enrolled in courses they do not care for. The less passion students have for a class combined with a teacher who does not want to teach low-tracked students makes for uninterested students just trying to get out of high school with the minimum amount of effort.

The final determinant of students' schedules is guidance counselors. Guidance counselors play a vital role: they are the link between the teachers, parents and students. Guidance counselors typically have the final word regarding the classes that students enroll in. School counselors are given training on how to handle tracking situations even though they may not agree with the concept of tracking, the school's grouping system, or the overall effects grouping by ability has on students.

Since guidance counselors play a vital role in tracking, my study will seek to find guidance counselors' opinions of tracking and ability grouping. Given the variety of opinions scholars have on tracking, the purpose of this research is to contrast these views with the perspectives of current guidance counselors. The first chapter is the literature review, which explores the key components of ability grouping, including: history, the role of parents, teachers and guidance counselors, track mobility, race and class patterns, treatment of students in different track levels, and detracking. It also addresses the history of guidance counselors and the importance of them in high school tracking. The second chapter explains the methodology for how the study will be constructed. This section

includes how guidance counselors are chosen and how interviews are carried out. The third chapter discusses the interview results by comparing the interview questions and noting similarities and differences amongst guidance counselors in different levels of district needs-to-student-resources and school demographics. It also compares the counselors' responses to scholars addressed in the literature review. The final chapter states conclusions that were found and future research that could be carried out regarding tracking in high schools.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

DEFINITION OF TRACKING

At its most basic definition, tracking, also known as ability grouping or homogeneous grouping, is how students are organized into different classes. While this is a general description of tracking, scholars interpret the concept in a variety of ways. Some definitions of tracking include: tracking is “the practice of separating students for instruction based on measures of their achievement or perceived ability” (Tyson 2013:167), “tracking refers to the practice of assigning students to instructional groups on the basis of ability” (Hallinan 1994:79), and “tracking involves the categorizing of students according to particular measures of intelligence into distinct groups” (Wheelock 1992:6). The definitions these scholars provide all have the same depiction of tracking: the grouping of students by ability.

As with many educational concepts, tracking is a controversial topic, which leads to biased definitions. These definitions tend to be anti-tracking, stating that ability grouping “[divides] students into programs that rigidly [proscribe] their course of study and that [admit] little opportunity for mobility from program to program” (Lucas 1999:1). A common criticism of ability grouping is that it enables schools to “sort, select, and socialize the next generation” (Finley 1984:223). The definitions of tracking and detracking refer to modern day tracking where students can choose their individual class levels: however, this was not always the case.

HISTORY OF TRACKING: FROM CURRICULAR TRACKS TO ABILITY GROUPS

Schools have been tracked since the 1860s. Tracking during this time meant that only a select group of students, the upper-class whites, were allowed to attend secondary school (Oakes 2005:16-17). In 1890, New England public schools opened for all students regardless of race and class. Due to the increased number of students attending high school and the variety of backgrounds students were coming from, schools decided to sort students based on who planned on attending college and who wanted to go straight into the workforce. Public schools ultimately created two groups: college and non-college, a practice that became known as curriculum tracking (Oakes 2005:18). Curriculum tracking is when students are sorted by curriculum, so they are in all college-prep classes or all occupational-prep classes; there is no mixing amongst tracks. This tracking method was modeled after other countries that tracked this way, such as the Netherlands and Germany (Lucas 1999:2, Wheelock 1992:8).

As might be expected, wealthy whites were in the college track and lower-class whites and minorities were in the non-college, or workforce, track. Curriculum tracking sorted students based on socioeconomic status, retaining the upper-class students on top with rigorous academics and keeping the lower-class students from college by placing them in the workforce track. Even though students of lower socioeconomic classes were not on the college track, they were still learning basic business skills to maintain their family's local business.

This system of sorting students continued until immigrants flooded America. Between 1880 and 1918, the number of young adults enrolled in school increased by 700% due to the heightened amount of students and the societal push to get an education (Oakes

2005:19). Clearly, schools needed a new way to sort students, specifically the immigrants coming from different cultures and speaking a variety of languages. Immigrants and Americans were still grouped based on a college or non-college track, but this was not working: while the college track was full of wealthy whites, the non-college track consisted of immigrants who could not learn due to the language barrier (Lucas and Berends 2002:331; Oakes 2005:19-20).

Students were either in the college track, which consisted of rigorous advanced classes that required more work and time, or the workplace track, where the focus was on how to get a job and succeed in lower end occupations. This way of organizing students allowed for little social mobility. Upper-class whites, since they were in the college track, would receive a higher education and have a better paid job. On the other hand, immigrants and minority students were being programmed to stay at the bottom of social hierarchy, getting just enough school exposure to grasp the basic skills needed for a low-class job (Oakes 2005:27; Lucas and Berends 2002:330).

Curricular tracking existed for about one hundred years before modern day tracking was developed in the 1960s and 1970s (Lucas and Berends 2002:330; Lucas 1999:6; Wells, Hirshberg, Lipton and Oakes 1995:20). This new type of tracking became known as ability grouping and is what most schools have today. Students can now enroll in a variety of academic class levels based on their skills, so a student could be in honors math, regular English, and advanced placement (AP) science. This sorting was seen as a more effective way of dividing students that schools felt would benefit both students and teachers. Students would now be learning with peers of the same skills and teachers would be teaching students of the same level. Given this change, previously honors curriculum

students could go to a lower track if the honors class was too difficult, and regular curriculum students could take higher-level classes, even in just one subject.

The development of ability groups would seem to be a huge opportunity for lower-class minority students who were almost always placed in lower-track classes based on their race and socioeconomic status. Immigrant students were no longer assigned to lower-track classes because they couldn't speak English: now they can take advanced math and regular English if they choose. This type of tracking had also never been done before, possibly because other countries didn't have the immigrant population that America now had to account for (Lucas 1999:6). Today, more than eighty percent of public schools track in some way (MacLeod 2009:88).

However, it is this movement to ability grouping that resulted in the tracking problems we face today. While it appeared that ability grouping would benefit minority groups the most, it actually brought about concerns. Ability grouping had "emerged as a solution to a specific set of educational and social problems," but it may have only created more issues (Oakes 2005:15). A main problem of this new tracking system was that it had little formal organization and oversight. Students were placed into classes based on opinions from teachers, parents, and school counselors, but neither seemed to have more weight over the other (Yonezawa, Wells and Serna 2002:52). Schools also looked at standardized test scores, grades in previous classes, and level of prior classes, but again, these did not necessarily dictate which classes' students took.

HISTORY OF HIGH SCHOOL GUIDANCE COUNSELORS

Influential People

Guidance counselors have been present since the late 19th century. They started as vocational counselors guiding people towards industrial careers and were eventually moved into secondary schools to help students find careers and choose colleges. The development of guidance counselors and the movement of counselors into schools would not be possible without a few significant people.

Frank Parsons is known as the “Father of Guidance” (Aubrey 1977:289; Aubrey 1982:199; Pope 2000:196). He began as a social worker in Boston and opened the Vocation Bureau in Civic Service House in Boston in 1908. The purpose of the settlement was to help child laborers become wage earners. The Vocation Bureau is known as the first institution of vocational guidance (Aubrey 1977:289; Aubrey 1982:199). Although Parsons started his guidance in a settlement house, he had high hopes for moving guidance counseling into public schools.

The first person that tried to bring guidance counseling into the public school system was Jesse Davis. Davis began as a school administrator in Detroit from 1889 to 1907 (Aubrey 1977:289; Aubrey 1982:199). His main concern regarded the vocational and social troubles of his students, so he wanted to implement a program into the school that addressed these issues. Davis moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan where he tried the first vocational guidance class as a part of the English curriculum: students explored potential careers that would coincide with their personal interests (Aubrey 1977:289; Aubrey 1982:199).

Robert Mathewson is another key player in the development of guidance counseling in high schools. Mathewson stressed the idea that development was an important principle in organizing and implementing school guidance programs. Mathewson stated,

The guidance process moves with the individual in a developmental sequence up to the age of maturity, helping him gain in self-understanding as well as perspective on his surroundings (Aubrey 1982:201).

According to Mathewson, guidance counselors should stay with students as they grow into young adults that enter the workforce or go to college. Aiding in students' maturity is a characteristic that teachers cannot provide but counselors can if they guide and support students accordingly.

The final significant person in the development of guidance counseling is Carl Rogers. Rogers is known as the biggest influence on guidance counseling in the 20th century (Aubrey 1977:292; Aubrey 1982:202). Rogers believed that psychiatry, clinical psychology, psychoanalysis, learning theory, and pastoral counseling should be included within the field of school counseling (Aubrey 1982:202). School counselors should not just be responsible for career and college counseling, but should also engage in personal guidance. Rogers' idea of individual counseling led to the development of client-centered counseling within schools, which prospered in the 1950s (Aubrey 1977:292). It is Rogers who influenced the name change from vocational counselors to guidance counselors.

The Development of Counseling

Vocational counseling began around 1890. Since then, career counseling has transformed to include college, school, and personal counseling. Counselors were originally only placed in urban areas; today, school counselors are in every public high school.

When counseling began at the end of the 19th century, its purpose was to move people from agricultural jobs to cities to work in factories (Pope 2000:196). These career counselors helped people find industrial jobs and utilized self-assessments to determine how prepared workers were for their new job. The next stage of counseling emerged in the 1920s when counseling moved into primary and secondary schools. The population rapidly increased after World War I, meaning that more people would need jobs. The government felt that guidance counselors should be placed in schools to help students find jobs. Three acts were passed that promoted vocational guidance in public schools: The George-Reed Act of 1929; The George-Ellzey Act of 1934; and the George-Deen Act of 1936 (Aubrey 1977:290; Pope 2000:197).

In 1940, a new expectation of school counselors emerged. Students were no longer just interested in getting a career; they now wanted to go to college and specialize in a subject or receive special training for a job. The desire to attend a university was also a result of the GI Bill of Rights: returning veterans had the right to work, but in order to work they must be trained in that specific field, thus students who wanted to go into similar jobs as the veterans also had to be trained, meaning they must go to college (Pope 2000:199). Now that students wanted to attend college and go to the workforce, tracking was implemented to sort students. Schools began “rigidly labeling, classifying, categorizing, and sorting individuals” based on what they wanted their occupation to be (Aubrey 1977:291). During this time, counselors were not trained in personal counseling: they simply led students into the proper track so they could go to college or prepare for the job they wanted for the future.

Between the 1950s and 1970s, client-centered counseling developed. With the influence of Carl Rogers, school counselors began to focus “exclusively on the emotional and affective components of students” with the goal of “actualizing the self” (Aubrey 1977:292). By the 1960s, school counselors were present and available to all students, not just the ones who needed career or college counseling (Aubrey 1977:293; Pope 2000:200). By the 1980s, counseling transformed from strictly vocational to also including college, personal, and academic counseling.

Today, school counselors receive extensive training in personal, vocational and college counseling. They have the proper resources and training to assist all types of students: English language learners, physically and mentally disabled, educationally gifted, and students with personal issues. School counselors help all students with their future goals, whether that is to graduate high school, go to college, or thrive in the workplace.

School Counseling Today

The development of school counseling gives counselors a more defined role within high schools; yet their job is still abstract and unclear. Aubrey (1982) identifies some central objectives of guidance counselors, including: help people choose jobs or further their education, engage in psychological intervention with individuals, and assist with student learning and development (198). However, as noted by the American School Counselor Association, these roles are still not entirely clear (House and Hayes 2002:4; O’Dell et al 1996:303).

Often, school counselors are given additional tasks from administrators and teachers. They are also commonly preoccupied with students’ parents, which can take

away time from assisting students. This causes counselors to “function at the discretion of others rather than form a well-conceived effort that addresses the needs of all students” (House and Hayes 2002:4). Guidance counselors already have a huge task ahead of them with just students: now they are being asked to assist administrators, teachers, and parents in addition to students.

Even though the role and definition of school counselors is not entirely clear or defined, they are still a crucial component of secondary schools. Counselors are often linked to student success. They help close the achievement gap by guiding students, regardless of race or socioeconomic background, towards a rigorous, yet achievable, academic experience (House and Hayes 2002:1). Often, lower-class families are not as educated on the education system, so school counselors are imperative for these students and their families. However, it is frequently the lower income schools that have fewer counselors; yet the students in these schools need their counselors just as much, if not more, than wealthier schools (House and Hayes 2002: 8; Lee and Ekstrom 1987:306; Reavis 1933:19).

Secondary school guidance counselors have an incredible task at hand. They play a vital role in assisting students with their high school success, their post-graduation plans, and their personal issues. Counselors also take on administrative tasks, teacher dilemmas, and parents who know everything and nothing about their child’s education. Counselors’ wide range of undertakings is why they are considered the bridge between students, teachers, administration, and parents. Their immense, and seemingly impossible, occupation is why guidance counselors are imperative in the modern secondary education school system.

ROLE OF PARENTS, TEACHERS AND GUIDANCE COUNSELORS IN TRACK ASSIGNMENTS

In addition to student achievement determining class level, other people influence which courses students are enrolled in. Specifically, parents, teachers, and guidance counselors affect which classes students should take. Students are most likely to consult their parents, then their guidance counselor, and lastly their teacher to gauge which ability group for each subject they should be placed in (Lee and Ekstrom 1987:296-297).

Role of Parents

Parent involvement can be attributed to a variety of factors. One reason is the access of parents: most teenagers see their parents daily so they are able to ask them for help. Students are often too nervous or intimidated to ask their teachers for suggestions. With regard to guidance counselors, students feel counselors are too busy with other students or administrative tasks to have time for them. (Lee and Ekstrom 1987:289).

While students are most likely to discuss tracking with their parents, the helpfulness of parents ranges based on their social class. Upper-class parents are more likely to discuss academics with their other wealthy friends compared to poorer families because upper class parents have more access to the school system. Wealthier families talk about academics within their social networks, so general information about the best teachers and the most challenging classes is discussed amongst this small community (Yonezawa, Wells and Serna 2002:47, 53). On the other hand, it is a common belief that many that “poor parents are uninvolved in their children’s learning, largely because they do not value education,” but this is not true (Gorski 2008:33). Lower income parents tend to work more

jobs and longer hours than their wealthier counterparts. Additionally, it is more difficult for poorer parents to physically get to school, which negatively impacts their involvement in the child's academics and disables them from fully understanding the tracking process (Gorski 2008:33; Schmidt and McKnight 2012:100). It is not that lower class parents do not want to be involved in their child's education: the problem is the balance between making money and being present at school.

Teacher Involvement

Another important determiner of which classes students take are the teachers. Teachers' opinions of where students should be placed are valued heavily and are significant. The more positively teachers view students, the more likely teachers are to encourage these students to challenge themselves and take tougher classes. Conversely, if teachers feel students' behavior and achievement is inconsistent, they will place students in a lower track (Kilgore 1991:194). Teachers want to have control over who they are teaching: having the ability to choose who is in their class means they can almost hand pick which students they will teach. This means that if a teacher teaches the highest track and chooses the most intelligent students, the teacher will educate a hardworking class of students who want to be challenged. On the opposing end, if teachers have no authority over where their students are placed, then they could be teaching a mixture of students that may not be as academically motivated (Kilgore 1991:200; Lucas 1999:13).

Teachers want as much control as possible of the classes they teach. Most teachers want to instruct the highest ability groups filled with the most intelligent, dedicated, hardworking students who genuinely want to learn. Teacher class assignments are often

organized by seniority: the teachers who have been there the longest teach the highest track while new teachers are responsible for regular and remedial classes (Kilgore 1991:197). Teachers want high-track classes because the students are enthusiastic about learning and “make teaching fun” since students “get excited about assignments” and are “motivated to make up the work” (Finley 1984:234-35).

High-track teachers set higher, more intense goals for their students. These goals include: the ability to reason logically in all subject areas, to think critically, to think for themselves and to collect and organize information (Oakes 2005:80-81). The students’ responses to what they have learned in class are just as positive as the teachers’ goals for them. Students’ reactions to the most important thing they have learned consist of: how to be creative, how to organize oneself, speaking in front of a group of people with confidence, how to communicate with teachers, and that making mistakes only helps you in the end (Oakes 2005:86-88). From Oakes’ (2005) study, it is clear that high-track teachers expect more from their students, resulting in students learning new skills and becoming more interested in academics.

On the other hand, teachers prefer not to teach lower-track classes because they view those students as lazy, careless, and irresponsible. Students in regular and remedial classes are known as the “nonschool type”: they are in school because they have to be, so they do the least amount of work possible to pass. Teachers feel frustrated and defeated when teaching these students because they are unresponsive to learning, making it impossible for teachers to motivate them to learn (Finley 1984:235). Often the newest teachers (and thus, the least qualified) are responsible for the lower-track classes, making it even harder for teachers to handle and encourage students to learn (Finley 1984:240).

While high-track teachers and students have similar goals, consisting of thinking critically and independently and challenging oneself, the mindset amongst low-track students and teachers is drastically different. Oakes' (2005) asks low and high-track teachers the same question: what are the five most critical things you want the students in your class to learn this year (81). Teachers who teach regular and remedial classes had low expectations that had to do with behavior rather than learning. These goals include: develop more self-discipline and better use of time, cooperativeness and responsibility, how to fill out insurance forms and income tax returns, and understanding the basic words to survive a job (82-83).

The students' responses to what they feel are the most important thing they have learned is similar to what teachers want students to learn. Again, these goals are not necessarily academically oriented but are focused on behavior and how to survive outside of high school. When asked what the most important thing low-track students have learned in class, their responses include: have your homework in and have materials ready whenever [the teacher] is ready, how to listen and follow the directions of the teacher, and to listen better (Oakes 2005:87-89). Based on what teachers want students to learn and what they are getting out of class, it appears that regular and remedial group students are seen as incompetent, in need of constant guidance, and their behavior and basic manners need to be watched.

Oakes' (2005) study brings to light how teachers think of students solely based on their track placement. Since trends have been noted amongst high and low tracks, including students' work ethic, their basic skills, and which races tend to be in each track, teachers have a preconceived notion of how their class will behave both academically and socially.

As a result of these expectations, most teachers do not want to teach low-track classes and feel something is wrong with them if they are placed in these classes. To an extent, even teachers are tracked. When teachers first start at a school, they are often placed in the regular and remedial classes since the subject matter is less intense (Finley 1984:240). Eventually teachers can exercise preference over which classes they want to teach, which are usually the higher-level classes. Teachers being placed in the tracks they requested is a sign that they are good teachers that the administration values; however, if teachers' preferences are ignored, they believe something is wrong with them. Thus, in a sense teachers are also tracked: if they are viewed in a positive light, then they teach the better classes; if not, they are stuck with the less advanced classes.

Guidance Counselors

The final players of which classes' students take are guidance counselors. Guidance counselors often serve as a bridge between the teachers, students, and parents. Unfortunately, their job consists of more than just helping students with classes, making them less accessible than anticipated. School counselors have administrative meetings, work closely with special education students, and have many students to account for, which results in counselors being less available to students (Lee and Ekstrom 1987:289). The more students feel their guidance counselor is available, the more likely they are to see their counselor; yet, if students often find their counselor is busy, they will be less inclined to reach out.

School counselors have a difficult profession because their job description changes based on the school they are in, the district, and the administration. While guidance

counselors want to provide students' access to rigorous academics and a successful future (whether that be college or not), counselors are often distracted from this goal due to rules set by administrators, teachers and parents (House and Hayes 2002). Counselors are stuck serving the administration by helping them with policy rules, pleasing parents, and supporting teachers rather than helping students with their academic and future goals (House and Hayes 2002). Although counselors work in schools with the intentions of helping students, they end up working with the school system more than the students.

Students often have a false perception of what guidance counselors do: they believe counselors are there just to help with students on the college track and brush everyone else aside. While this is not the case, guidance counselors do meet with more college-bound students compared to those who do not want to attend more schooling after high school (Lee and Ekstrom 1987:290, 299; O'Dell *et al* 1996:304). This is because such students and parents need more information on which classes to take, which schools to apply to, how to pick a school, and standardized tests that non-college bound students would not necessarily need. Counselors also focus on students who need the most help, including students with disabilities, with serious family problems, or with disruptive troubles within the classroom. Guidance counselors feel obligated to focus on these groups because they are "visible situations" that impact the majority of students and a large number of parents (O'Dell *et al* 1996:304).

School counselors are excellent resources in helping students who want to go to college pick the appropriate classes that will help them with their future. These classes tend to be more defined within the school curriculum. Thus, those students who do not want to attend college are left with a more flexible schedule leaving them confused as to

which classes to take (Schmidt 2012:111). The obvious solution for non-college bound students is to approach their guidance counselor; however, it is typically these students that do not understand the role school counselors play and how they can help both those who do and do not want to go to college (Lee and Ekstrom 1987:290).

If students do not discuss classes with their guidance counselor, then students' teachers primarily make the decision. So, if students wanted to take a more advanced class but did not discuss it with their counselor, they will stay in the lower track. Since guidance counselors serve as the bridge between teachers, parents and students, discussing classes with them will only be beneficial (Lucas 1999:49). But again, since students do not fully understand what counselors do and are discouraged when their counselor is not available, the students who need the most guidance often do not receive it.

The students who need school counseling the most are those not attending college, which are typically low-income minority students (Lucas 1999:49). However, schools located in low socioeconomic status neighborhoods with a high percentage of minority students tend to have less guidance counselors in general, making access to them even more difficult (House and Hayes 2002; Lee and Ekstrom 1987:306). Low-income areas with high-minority students tend to have parents who work multiple jobs and do not have the general knowledge of the school system that upper class parents do (Gorski 2008:33; Schmidt and McKnight 2012:100). Since students' parents are less active in these schools, there should be more readily available guidance counselors to assist students with class selection and post graduation decisions.

TRACK MOBILITY AND HOW TRACKS ARE ASSIGNED

Guidance counselors and teachers help with track mobility: the moving of ability groups within one or many subjects. There are a variety of reasons why students do not move tracks: among the most common is to maintain the social hierarchy that is already in place. Teachers and guidance counselors often have a preconception as to where students will be after high school: high-track white students attending college and working in a well paid job while low-track minority students attend a two year college or going straight to work at an average job (Lucas 1999:3, 9; Oakes 2005:144-145; Yonezawa, Wells and Serna 2002:61). Counselors and school administrators often focus their attention on upper-class parents whose sons and daughters are often placed in high tracks as a result of their involvement in the system. Since lower-class minority students' parents tend to be less knowledgeable about the high school system, their teenagers are left to figure out the school system for themselves. School counselors get so wrapped up in upper-class parents that they aren't available for the low-tracked non-college bound students who need counseling (Lucas and Good 2001:140).

Lucas (1999, 2001) analyzes the possible patterns of mobility students can partake in. If the three tracks are low, middle (regular) and high, then there are nine track mobility combinations that can be made (Lucas 1999: 77; Lucas and Good 2001:144). A student can remain in his track (middle-middle), move down in track (middle-low) or move up (middle-high). If a student starts in a high track, he can either move down one or two levels, and the opposite is presented for a student beginning in the lowest track. Simply from the basis of having three tracks and nine patterns, Lucas (1999) infers that it is more likely to move up in track the lower one's track is (97). This is because if you are at the lowest track,

you can climb up two tracks, but if you are at the middle track then you can only move up one track to be at the highest track (Lucas 1999:98).

Lucas' (1999, 2001) study makes sense if no other components are considered. However, once other factors such as race and socioeconomic status are present, his analysis changes. Lucas and Good (2001) analyze track mobility among upper and lower class whites and upper and lower class minority students (blacks and Latinos). Their findings show that sociodemographic groups do influence mobility, but in general, more students experience downward mobility rather than upward (Lucas and Good 2001:148-149). This research conflicts with Lucas' previous point that it is more likely to move up tracks than down since ideally students want to be at the most advanced track. However, as his more recent work shows, upper and lower class whites and minorities are more likely to move down class levels than up.

Another component of track mobility that Lucas (1999) examines is how race, sex, and ethnicity play a role in math and English mobility represented in four graphs (111). The patterns presented in the graphs are inconsistent and difficult to analyze, as Lucas indicates in his analysis (1999:110). There appears to be no constant pattern amongst which race, sex, or ethnicity experiences the most upward or downward track mobility between grades eleven and twelve. This study goes against all of the research stating that whites are more likely to be placed in college preparation classes while blacks and Latinos dominate non-college classes. Given that students in lower tracks tend to be the least motivated and oftentimes drop out as a result of their negative attitudes (Oakes 2005:146), Lucas' inconsistent findings were surprising since they weren't so obvious and clear.

Since tracks are assigned due to a plethora of factors, it is nearly impossible for there to be a set system of how students are placed into classes. There are both academic and non-academic factors to how groups are sorted. The academic reasons include: grades, scores on standardized tests, prior track placements, and course prerequisites (Hallinan 1994:79; Lleras 2008:889; Yonezawa, Wells and Serna 2002:49). Non-academic factors are course conflicts, co-curricular and extracurricular schedules, and teacher resources (Hallinan 1994:80). Another aspect is what the student and parents want compared to what teachers and guidance counselors feel is best. Even though these sorting categories exist, one is not any more important than the other, especially with regard to the academic factors. There is no special formula of how students are sorted: they just are. Given that the sorting is a unorganized, the common trends that follow are surprising.

EFFECTS OF TRACKING ON DIFFERENT RACES AND CLASSES

One of the consequences of ability grouping is a pattern of race and class segregation: upper-class whites tend to be in high-track classes while minority lower-class students are in lower tracks (Hallinan 1994:80; Lleras 2008:906). This can lead to “the creation of a school within a school, the benefits of the diverse environment are diminished, or perhaps even lost” (Tyson 2013:172). The upper and lower-track groups, and thus the whites and minority students, become so separate that the school is divided in half. The goal of ability grouping and doing away with curriculum tracking was to bring about diversity, yet classes are less heterogeneous than ever.

Many scholars have examined this phenomenon, specifically the racial divide between how whites and African American students are treated within the classroom. It

turns out that African Americans, one group that is often discriminated against in school, start off with an academic disadvantage. African Americans learn less than whites for a variety of reasons, including: beginning elementary school a year later, graduating high school up to four years later, being placed in racially segregated schools in urban districts, and being treated differently by teachers (Lleras 2008:887). Due to the less advanced school districts African American students are placed into and the lack of enthusiasm from their teachers, they are immediately discouraged within the academic system.

Once African Americans and other minority groups are placed in low-tracks, they tend to remain there. Some students recognize that they are smart enough to move up, but they do not for a variety of reasons. When Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna (2002) investigated this topic they wondered whether, given the opportunity, if students would move up tracks. If students had fewer prerequisites for classes, did not have to depend on teacher or counselor opinions on which classes to take, and previous grades were not a factor, would students move up tracks, or would they remain where they are?

The research findings were fascinating and expose details as to why minority students prefer to be in lower tracks, even if they have the intelligence to move up. Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna (2002) divided their reasons into three categories: institutional barriers, tracked aspirations, and choosing respect (39-40). All three reasons play a vital role in why minority students reject moving up in the academic hierarchy.

The first, institutional barriers, are a result of lack of communication. Institutional barriers mean that students receive more or less information about the school based on where they live. White upper-class families discuss academics and the school system more than minority lower-class families. As a result, upper-class students know more about the

best teachers, which classes to take, and academic changes within the school (Yonezawa, Wells and Serna 2002:39). Another component of institutional barriers is the communication within the school. When schools decided to give students more flexibility regarding which classes they can take, most teachers only told their advanced classes but neglected to mention it to the lower track classes (Yonezawa, Wells and Serna 2002:47). Supposedly, the reason schools were providing class flexibility options was for the low-track students, yet they were the ones who knew least about what was happening.

Tracked aspirations were another key component to why students chose not to move ability groups. Some teachers recommended that their students move to a more advanced class, but students rejected this opportunity. Low-track minority students are generally afraid to move to a higher track because they worry they will not fit in and will be picked on because they are of a minority race or ethnicity (Yonezawa, Wells and Serna 2002:50). These students are also nervous that they will not be able to keep up with the advanced students, so they would rather stay where they are most comfortable.

This theme introduces the next reason for students remaining in a low track: choosing respect. This means that students do not want to be in a class where they will be the racial minority because they fear that teachers and other students will not respect them (Cooper 1996: 197; Tyson 2013:173; Yonezawa, Wells and Serna 2002: 40). The main reasons for students remaining in the lower level class include: wanting to be with their friends, not buying into the social hierarchy, not feeling valued, and not believing in honors classes. The most significant of these reasons is that students want to stay with their friends where they feel the most comfortable. Students have been tracked for years; as a result, they know the students in their classes and have become friends with them. Since

the majority of low-track classes are full of minority students, they can meet people of the same ethnic and racial background. Students who have contemplated moving tracks did not because “they wouldn’t want to deal with the grief they would take for leaving their peer groups” (Yonezawa, Wells and Serna 2002:54).

Another respect issue that students did not want to face was the judgments they would receive upon being in an honors class. High track classrooms are full of upper-class white and Asian students who have been in advanced classes since middle school. Minority students fear they will not be able to handle the pressure of being the only ethnically or racially diverse student. They would be too nervous to ask for help or participate in class out of fear for answering the question incorrectly: any sign of seeming lesser will only draw more attention to the minority students, which is exactly what they do not want (Yonezawa, Wells and Serna 2002:56). Minority students want to blend in as much as possible, and moving to a higher track would only cause them to stand out.

In addition to low-track students worrying about high-track students judging them, they are also concerned about how teachers will treat them. Teachers have a mental racial hierarchy: once they see a class full of a certain group, they immediately judge how the classroom will function. One teacher was quoted with a detailed description of a general understanding of each racial group:

You are Latino and lazy, that you are Asian, you are smart, if you are White, oh God, the best, and if you are black, you are bad, horrific. If you walk into a class full of Asians and white students, you think that this is a really good class... If you walk into a class that is majority African American and Latino, you know its bad, because they are lazy and dumb (Tyson 2013:173).

Whether students are Latino, Asian, white, or black, they are being prejudged once a teacher walks into a classroom. Unfortunately, tracking has created these judgments. Low-

tracked students often have lower self-esteem and do not work as hard because their teachers expect less from them (Oakes 2005:79-83). If minority students would not be supported by their teachers or peers if placed in a higher track, then they believe they should just remain where they are.

While the majority of schools group students by ability and consequently racially segregate students, it has been shown that students learn best in racially, ethnically, and socially diverse classrooms (Hyland 2006:67-69; Tyson 2013:172). Having mixed classes gives students the opportunity to learn about different cultures and gain perspective of other students who are unlike them (Hyland 2006:69). Having a class full of upper-class white students will be much more ordinary than mixing in blacks, Latinos, and Asians. Hyland (2006) argues why social studies classes should be as racially, ethnically, and socially diverse as possible: if students are learning about racial equality and how to create social change, then it is imperative that as many possible perspectives be considered. A racially homogeneous class contradicts what social studies teaches students, so it only makes sense that these classes be as diverse as possible (Hyland 2006:67-68).

This racial segregation enhances the already established social hierarchy: whites stay at the top while minorities are stuck at the bottom. The more students are tracked, the more “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer,” increasing the placement and performance gap (Lleras 2008:906). As indicated in some tracking definitions, tracking is based on “perceived ability” (Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna 2002:38) and divides students into programs that “sorts, selects, and socializes the next generation” (Finley 1984:223). The common pattern that minorities are in lower tracks proves that tracking is not doing what it was intended to accomplish.

TREATMENT OF STUDENTS BASED ON ABILITY GROUP

In addition to classes being racially segregated as a result of ability grouping, students and teachers behave very distinctly in high and low tracks. High tracks cover more material than lower tracks do. Students in high level ability groups achieve more because the instructional quality and teacher expectations are greater, there are fewer behavioral issues, and students generally have a better attitude about school (Lleras 2003:888; Oakes 2005:85, 98, 103). Students want to be challenged, and often low-track teenagers are not pushed hard enough for them to care about school.

Oakes (2005) surveyed a variety of teachers and students of different track levels to determine the focus and tone of various ability groups. There is a clear divide: teachers who teach advanced classes enjoy it more and feel they are having a greater impact on their students. This outcome is also a result of the dedication and hard work that honors students present. However, these characteristics are less likely in lower-track classrooms. Through Oakes' research, it is clear that high-track teachers expect more from their students with regard to appropriate behavior, taking advantage of instructional time, and the amount of homework given.

Oakes (2005) references twenty-five schools' teachers and students' regarding how they feel their class time is spent. When asked what percentage of class time is spent on instructional learning, high-track English teachers reported spending eighty-two percent of class time teaching, which is eleven percent more than low-track English spends. Low-track math teachers only spend sixty-three percent of class on teaching while high-track math devotes seventy-seven percent (Oakes 2002:98). The amount of learning time could also be

devoted to the percentage of class that is off task. High-track math and English spend a combined three percent off task while low-track math and English's combined percent is eight percent (Oakes 2002:101). This correlation makes sense: the more time off task, the less time spent learning: since low-track classes spend more time off task, it follows that less learning is occurring.

High-track teachers also have greater expectations from students. Teachers assign much more homework: high-track English teachers give about thirty more minutes of homework than low-track English teachers. The math homework gap is not as large, but it is still significant: high-track math students have an average of thirty-eight minutes of homework while low-track students only have twenty-seven minutes (Oakes 2002: 101). Appropriate behavior is also held to a higher standard in advanced classes. While low-track teachers focus on behavior because they expect it to be poor, high-track teachers anticipate that students are in the honors class because they know how to behave properly (Oakes 2002:103). Poor behavior also correlates with learning time: the less time teachers are interrupted by disruptive behavior, the more students can engage in learning.

Students recognize that the best teachers are teaching the most advanced classes. Students in lower-track classes feel they are being punished because they are not in the upper-level classes with less enthusiastic teachers (Cooper 1996:195). However, when students are placed with teachers that are passionate about the students and the subject material, low-track students thrive. Since they were so accustomed to having indifferent teachers that just go through the motions, having a teacher that inspires them is exciting and motivates them to learn (Cooper 1996:196). Simply placing a label on the level of a class deters teachers before even stepping into the classroom. Maybe if teachers were

enthusiastic about teaching all tracks and all subjects then the negative effects low-track students experience would be minimized.

DETRACKING

While the overall purpose of tracking is to “increase the effectiveness and efficiency of instruction” (Hallinan 1994:80), this is often not the case, as presented in the negative effects of tracking. Oakes (2005) compares what educators believe the benefits of tracking are with the reality of the effects of tracking. The four perceived benefits are: bright students’ learning will be delayed if they are in class with slower students and slower students can be mediated better if they are in class together; slower students will be intimidated by brighter students; placement determines ones’ future classes; and it is easier for teachers to teach in a homogeneous classroom (Oakes 2005:6-7). Oakes denies these assumptions on the premise that “no group of students has been found to benefit consistently from being in a homogeneous group” (2005:7).

Given that the purposes of tracking are being discounted, scholars and educators have considered eliminating tracking completely. Detracking involves creating heterogeneous classrooms: not sorting students by ability, but having students of all skill levels in one classroom learning the same subject (Hyland 2006:64; Wheelock 1992:6-7; Yonezawa, Wells and Serna 2002:41). This would mean there is no higher or lower ability group: the racial and socioeconomic status implications that are a result of high and low tracks wouldn’t exist because these levels would not exist. All students would be treated equally by their teachers, counselors, and their peers and students would not feel the pressure to choose between staying with their friends or moving to the appropriate ability

level (Cooper 1996:191; Yonezawa, Wells and Serna 2002:42). America preaches equal education for all, but given the race, ethnic, and class divide as a result of tracking, our education system is unequal (Wheelock 1992:15-16).

Detracking seems like a possible solution to the tracking problems. However, detracking is unlikely to happen because white, middle and upper-class parents object to detracking since they don't want the system to "dumb down" their college-bound teenagers (Cooper 1996:199; Wells, Hirshberg, Lipton, and Oakes 1995:23). These families believe that tracking, specifically college-bound classes, helps their teenagers get into a good college and grow to be part of the upper class just like their parents. These parents are also capable of finding their teenagers a new school if the public school decides to detrack, causing the public school to lose funding. Since eighty percent of American high schools track (MacLeod 2009:88) and ability grouping has become such a significant part of our education system, detracking is a huge step that would be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve among the majority of American high schools.

RESEARCH TO BE CONDUCTED

Although tracking is common in today's education system, it is a complex topic that is constantly being debated. There are many components of tracking, from its history, to the main players (parents, teachers, and guidance counselors) and all of the race, ethnicity, and class trends that have been presented. Given that there are so many aspects of the tracking system, conversations with those who are involved in tracking, including students, parents, teachers and guidance counselors, will help gain perspective on the benefits and weaknesses of tracking.

This study will seek to understand current features of tracking and how these present day characteristics relate to prior research. Research will be carried out by interviewing guidance counselors in a variety of school districts with different racial, ethnic and class compositions. Guidance counselors are seen as the bridge between teachers, parents, and students and are often the final determinant of which classes students take. In discussing tracking with present guidance counselors, the advantages and disadvantages of tracking can be evaluated in relation to a specific school. Examining schools of a variety of racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds will help gain perspective on the perceived trends of tracking and if detracking is a potential option. Comparisons will also be made between schools of different district needs-to-resources, which will show if schools of different economic levels are as distinct as scholars believe they are.

Chapter 2: Methodology

PURPOSE OF STUDY:

The purpose of this study is to analyze the role of tracking and ability grouping in high schools, who the key players are in deciding students' classes, how tracks are assigned, and common effects of ability groups on students of different race and class status. Research has presented negative and positive effects of ability grouping since tracking began in the middle of the nineteenth century. One of the most significant concerns about ability grouping is the impact it has on non-white, lower class students who tend to take less challenging classes even though they could excel in advanced courses. The factors contributing to this phenomenon include teachers, parents, peers, and the individual student. Unfortunately, the combination of these people is what often prevents students from excelling in school.

POPULATION AND SAMPLING

High school guidance counselors are the bridge between students, parents, teachers, and the administration. They hear each individual perspective regarding which classes a student should be enrolled in. They also communicate with administrators to improve the overall education students receive in high school. Guidance counselors work with students and families from a variety of backgrounds who have different goals and ways of measuring success.

Guidance counselors play a crucial role in secondary schools for teachers, parents, students, and the administration. Given their role as a link amongst all components of the school, guidance counselors are the ideal group to discuss tracking and ability grouping

with. They hear opinions of teachers, students and parents on which classes students should take and work with the administration to improve grouping policies within the school.

The guidance counselors interviewed were chosen based on school demographics and location. Using the “New York State Education Department Report Cards” (NYSED.gov), counties and school districts were chosen based on location. Only public schools were used. In total, forty-nine districts within seven counties became the sample of schools (Appendix A). The “Similar Schools Identified by District and School Demographics” found on the New York State Education Department website was used to categorize schools on a student-needs-to-district-resources basis (Appendix B). The NY State Department of Education assigned a number to districts based on if the schools were of high, average, or low student need relative to district resources, and if they were in the higher, middle, or lower range within the category. Some groups have been combined to preserve confidentiality among schools.

Selected schools ranged in size, ethnicity, socioeconomic status of students, and the percentage of student-needs-to-district-resources. The sample includes guidance counselors from a variety of schools, providing a demographically diverse sample of secondary schools. Guidance counselors were contacted by email to arrange a face-to-face interview that ranged from thirty to forty-five minutes. Thirteen guidance counselors were contacted. Six responded and set up interviews; one responded but did not feel the guidance department had a significant role in tracking; and six did not reply. One month after the initial email was sent, the six schools that did not reply were emailed again, but a different counselor within the department was contacted. After this second group was

contacted, one more counselor responded, giving a total of seven guidance counselors that were interviewed.

Before being interviewed, counselors were asked to read and sign an informed consent form, giving participants permission to withdraw from the study without any penalty and inform them of their anonymity within the final research study (Appendix C). The identities of the counselors in this study are masked so their geographical location, personal identity, and school are not named. All school names are pseudonyms.

INTERVIEWS

Interviews were held in the school the guidance counselor is located in, with the exception of one counselor who was interviewed in a separate public place. An interview questionnaire of thirteen questions was used, but other questions were asked as needed (Appendix D). The questions asked included: who plays a role in the classes students take, the purpose and goals of tracking, track mobility, positive and negative impacts of tracking in that particular high school, the effects of tracking on teachers, and if the school would ever detrack. During the interview, a tape recorder was used as well as note taking.

DATA ANALYSIS

After each interview, the recordings were listened to and themes were noted. Themes included comparisons to prior research and commonalities amongst the schools. The topics of focus were racial and class divisions as a result of tracking and how classes are organized within each schools. Guidance counselor opinions of the effectiveness of

ability grouping were also important in noting whether the practice of tracking should continue in each school and in high schools as a whole.

Chapter 3: Results and Analysis

DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE SAMPLE

Three of the counselors were from schools classified as high-needs-to-resources, two counselors were from average-needs-to-resources schools, and two counselors were from low-needs-to-resources schools (“Similar Schools Identified by District and School Demographics”). The variation in needs-to-resources between each school allowed for the discussion of a variety of factors, including parent involvement, socioeconomic status struggles, college enrollment, and graduation percentages. These components played an integral part in counselors’ opinions of tracking and ability grouping in their schools.

The three high-needs schools are Ashburn, Greenberg, and Jennings High Schools. As noted above, school names are pseudonyms. To preserve confidentiality, I have reported demographic characteristics as ranges. Ashburn is an urban school with a population of over one thousand students. According to the guidance counselor, over seventy percent of students are eligible for free or reduced priced lunch. Ashburn is also ethnically diverse with a school population that represents students from over forty different countries. The second school is Greenberg High School, a rural school with a population between eight hundred and one thousand students. According to the guidance counselor, over ninety percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced priced lunch, making the town one of the poorest in New York state. The final high-needs school is Jennings High School. Jennings has a student population between five and eight hundred students. According to the New York State Report Cards 2011-2012, about twenty-five percent of students are eligible for free lunch.

These three high-needs schools struggle with student motivation and parent involvement. The counselor from Ashburn High School explained, "Parent involvement is scarce across the board." The counselors also noted that, while they try their hardest to encourage students to take the most difficult classes they can handle, "it is a challenge to motivate these students and we do a lot of mentoring to help them," as stated by the Jennings counselor. Not all of the students at Ashburn, Greenberg, and Jennings are college-bound, so these guidance counselors have to work harder to figure out a post-graduate plan for each student that still promotes success.

Campanella and Spalding High School are the two average-needs-to-resources high schools. Both have a population between four hundred and seven hundred students. According to the New York State Report Cards 2011-2012, less than thirty-five percent of students are eligible for free lunch at both schools. Both student populations are made up of ninety percent or more white students, so there is little ethnic diversity within Campanella and Spalding.

The counselors at Campanella and Spalding recognize the gaps in their school but work hard to close them. A significant number of students at these schools are eligible for fee-waivers for standardized tests. The students and parents are pro-active about receiving these forms. Parents are also more involved in their child's course selection in these communities. The biggest complaint between these two guidance counselors is that, "We track too early in middle school so students are already divided in high school. They think they know which group they belong in, when really they should move up or down a class level." Early ability grouping results in students' levels being pre-determined in high school, which can discourage them from taking harder classes throughout high school.

The final two schools are low-needs-to-resources schools. Bresnahan and Simmons High School have populations of over one thousand students. According to the New York State Report Cards 2011-2012, less than ten percent of students at both schools are eligible for free lunch. Simmons High School is more ethnically diverse than Bresnahan, but neither are incredibly diverse.

The guidance counselors at Bresnahan and Simmons describe students' parents as "helicopter parents" who are constantly involved in their child's academics. Parents at both of these schools are hugely engaged in the school system and are consistently advocating for the best education for their children since "they often come to this community for the schools." These counselors acknowledge that, "there is a lot of leg work that goes on behind the scenes" to make scheduling successful for each student. Counselors at these schools try to make the system as realistic to real life as possible, with the Simmons counselor noting that "not everyone should get the award and not everyone goes to the same college. If we are trying to prepare [students] beyond high school, I think there should be an element of tracking within schools." The graduation percentages at Bresnahan and Simmons are also significantly higher than at the other schools and over ninety percent of the students attend a two or four year college after high school.

ORGANIZATION OF CLASSES

The first group of questions concerns how students are organized into classes, including the role of guidance counselors, teachers, parents, and students in the process. In all seven schools, the student is the center of their schedule: they decide which classes they want to take. The role of the guidance counselor is to create the master schedule with the

student. With the exception of one counselor who meets with students in small groups, all of the counselors meet with each individual student to create his or her schedule for the following year.

The role of teachers in students' classes varies. In all of the high-needs and average-needs schools, teachers play a minimal role. Some teachers make recommendations about whether students should move up to the honors level or down to the Regents (regular) level. However, these suggestions do not carry much weight in the classes students are ultimately enrolled in. The main purpose of teachers in high-needs schools is assisting in class placement for special education students. Teachers help with documenting special education students' progress and suggest whether students' individual education program (IEP) needs to be altered.

At the two low-needs schools, teacher recommendations are important in determining students' future schedules. At Bresnahan High School, teachers spend half of a class period discussing courses students can take the following year, and then students write down the class they would like to take on a form, which is approved by the teacher and guidance counselor. The system at Simmons High School is unlike any of the other six schools. Here, students' grades determine which class level is most appropriate for them. However, if a student would like to take a more advanced class but does not have the minimum grade requirement, they may receive a teacher recommendation. Teachers at Simmons may override the grade pre-requisite if a student is an active participant in class, thinks critically, and puts forth a substantial effort. Typically, this only occurs if a student's grade is a few points below the minimum needed to move up.

Overall, teachers do not play a hugely crucial role in determining students' future schedules. While teacher recommendations are helpful, especially for special education students, they are the smallest contributor to student's class schedules among all seven schools.

The final determinant of students' schedules is their parents. As the Ashburn High School counselor stated, "In most districts, parents can get what they want if they advocate enough." This is the case with all of the seven schools visited. After students create their schedule with the guidance counselor, a copy is sent home to the parents. Parents may call the counselor if they have any questions; otherwise, that is the student's final schedule. Oftentimes, parents contact counselors if they want their child in a higher-level class. These phone calls are more frequent among the average-needs and low-needs schools where more parents have professional jobs and are actively involved in their child's education. Counselors' provide support for why that student is enrolled in a specific class, but ultimately, if parents want their child in a different class, he or she will be moved.

Although it would seem like parents have the most weight in students' class selection, counselors do not feel they do. Each counselor had a different opinion on who carries the most weight in deciding which classes students take. In five of the seven schools, the student was one of the key players along with their parents (one school), counselor (three schools), or teachers (one school). In the other two schools, one counselor felt she was the most important in deciding which classes' students take, and the other said the department head was most vital.

Analyzing how students are organized into their classes plays a significant role in ability grouping. As discussed in Lee and Ekstrom (1987), students often speak to their

parents about their classes because they feel their counselors are too busy to meet with them. However, the seven counselors would disagree with this statement since they all give individual attention to each student during scheduling, including Bresnahan High School where students meet in small groups. The Bresnahan counselor stated only ten percent of parents will override classes. For a low-needs school with incredibly involved parents, ten percent is a small number. This shows that counselors provide time and effort in each student's schedule.

TRACK MOBILITY

Track mobility is the moving of ability levels within one or more subjects. A student going from Regents-level math to honors math is an example of track mobility. Depending on how schools sort their students, mobility can be difficult. However, at the seven schools visited counselors see track mobility as easy. Factors that influence the simplicity of mobility include the time of year and the subject. The reasons for students wanting to switch are generally the same across the seven schools. These consist of students taking on too many challenging classes, being bored in an easy class, or students' future goals and interests changing.

The process for students' changing classes in the middle of an academic year is similar among the schools. First, students meet with their guidance counselor and discuss what they want to switch and why. At Campanella High School and Spalding High School (both average-needs schools), a conversation between the teacher, parent, student, and guidance counselor takes place to make sure everyone approves of the switch. At the high-needs and low-needs schools, a form is required. Students fill out the form indicating what

they want to switch from, which class they want to take, and why they would like to change the class. For three of the schools (Bresnahan, Ashburn, and Jennings), once the form is signed, the students can switch. At Greenberg High School, a committee of administrators approves the form and at Simmons High School, the department supervisor and principal must approve the form.

While the guidance counselors do not want students constantly switching classes, they all said it is obvious when a class needs to be changed. Counselors made a distinction between ability and effort switches. There is a difference between a student who puts forth an honest attempt but is still struggling and a student who is not exerting any effort and failing as a result. During the academic year, it is easier and more common for students to move down ability levels (i.e. from honors math to Regents-level math). From year to year, it is equally easy for students to move up or down class levels. It is most common that students stay at the track level that they started in when they came to high school. However, moving down a class level is more common because as classes become more rigorous, students may need to lessen their course load.

Guidance counselors strongly encourage students to move class level from year to year if it is appropriate for the student. The New York State Regents Exam is a significant indicator of whether or not students should switch class level. Typically, counselors are open to students switching if they want to. At Ashburn, there are no grade pre-requisites and there is an open enrollment system for all classes, including AP, so track mobility from year to year is easy and encouraged. On the opposite end, Simmons has strict grade pre-requisites students must attain to switch class levels, so as long as the grades are met, then students can easily switch.

The students themselves ultimately determine their track mobility. Students know their future goals and interests the best, so the guidance counselor is just there to help students achieve those aspirations. However, as Lucas and Good (2001) pointed out, ones socioeconomic status often influences their mobility and typically this mobility is downward (from honors to Regents level). As Hallinan (1994) noted, there are both academic and non-academic reasons as to why students change their schedules.

While Lucas and Good may be correct that lower-class students tend to experience downward mobility, Hallinan's analysis of academic and non-academic reasons must also be considered when analyzing why students are taking less advanced classes. As the counselors at Ashburn and Greenberg noted, low socioeconomic status students frequently miss first period due to lack of transportation to school or having to bring a younger sibling to elementary school, which causes students to be late and fail their first period class.

PURPOSE OF TRACKING AND ABILITY GROUPING

Tracking and ability grouping in high school are controversial topics. However, there are clear reasons as to why they exist in these seven upstate New York schools. When asked what counselors feel the general purpose and goals of tracking are, their answers were quite similar. Counselors believe that tracking helps students achieve the highest caliber of learning for their ability and that it aids in teachers' pace and depth of the class.

The schools are aware that their demographics influence the purpose and goals of tracking. For the high-needs schools, Ashburn, Greenberg, and Jennings, counselors' main concern is students getting lost in the shuffle. Ashburn, an ethnically and economically diverse high school, has an open tracking system because it does not want to create a

“school within a school.” By creating an environment where students are in the same classroom regardless of their socioeconomic background or ethnicity, it creates diverse classes that all students are comfortable in, according to the Ashburn counselor. Although Greenberg and Jennings have less diverse populations, they recognize that motivation is a key indicator of which track students should be in. The guidance counselors agree that mixing highly academic students with those who are less motivated may result in the lower-achieving students becoming lost in the shuffle. They therefore feel that ability grouping is important to prevent students from getting lost.

The average-needs schools have similar thoughts regarding tracking to the high-needs schools. They believe that ability grouping helps students excel and teachers specialize the class. Consequently, students often become stuck in one track. At Spalding High School, the guidance counselor feels they track too early, so students remain in a Regents or honors track when they should consider switching. A similar problem exists at Campanella. The guidance counselor also added that a certain stigma is associated with being an honors student, which is often a deterrent for students to move up.

For low-needs schools Bresnahan and Simmons, tracking helps enhance students' schedules for college. At Bresnahan, ninety-seven percent of the students go to college and ninety-four percent of students attend college from Simmons. These guidance counselors, just like those at the other five schools, want students to reach their highest potential. Most of these students come from an upper-middle-class background with parents who have a college degree or higher, so students also want to achieve an education measurable to that of their parents. Guidance counselors are aware of the education Bresnahan and Simmons'

students want to attain, so they stress the importance of grades and the proper ability group to earn the best grades possible.

While all seven guidance counselors agree on the purpose of tracking and ability grouping, their ways of implementing this goal ranges depending on the school's demographics. Counselors' awareness of students' future goals is helpful in determining the appropriate classes for students.

FAIRNESS OF TRACKING PROCESS AND CHANGES TO BE MADE

When asked if the counselors feel their school tracking process is fair, all seven counselors immediately said yes. Reasons for fairness include the students being in the center and having the most control over their schedule, receiving input from everyone (teachers, parents, student, administration, and counselor), and the components that are considered when making a schedule, such as grades, pre-requisites, and teacher recommendations. Although some schools group differently than others, counselors' explanations for why each school's tracking process is fair were the same for all seven schools.

Although all of the counselors feel their grouping process is fair, they do recognize that it benefits some groups more than others. Comparing the special education, Regents level, and honors/AP students, counselors again had the same opinion regarding which group benefitted from tracking and which did not. Tracking is advantageous for the special education and honors/AP students and can hurt the Regents-level students who are stuck in the middle.

The special education students are benefitted most when they are in integrated classes with an extra teacher so they feel included with other students and are still receiving extra attention when needed. Since their schedule is so specialized, special education students are reviewed and their individual education programs are constantly revised to best cater to each student. The second group that benefits the most from ability grouping is the honors and AP students. Counselors feel they are at an advantage because they are surrounded by highly motivated, hard-working academic students who enjoy school and genuinely want to learn. The teachers can also challenge these students since they will put in the effort to succeed.

With regard to tracking hurting a group of students, guidance counselors all agreed that Regents level students and students who are taking harder classes than they should be can be negatively impacted by tracking. Regents classes often contain a mixed group of students, from the laziest to the hardest working that do not want to be honors but could be. Regents-level classes are often the hardest to teach because, while it is an ability group, the students are of various capabilities and motivations. According to the counselors from Simmons, Bresnahan, and Jennings, Regents students often lose motivation to move up. The opposite problem exists at Campanella and Spalding, where students that should be in Regents classes opt to be in honors classes and struggle. Guidance counselors also comment on Regents-level scheduling, which is the most difficult because there are the most Regents sections.

While counselors acknowledge that tracking can benefit some groups and not others, they still feel their grouping process is fair. Yet, two of the seven schools would like

to make substantial changes in their school's tracking process and two other schools would like to make minor changes.

Of the high-needs schools, two would like to make minor changes. These include adding classes to the lower levels and having more teachers. Greenberg and Jennings both experienced sizeable budget cuts, resulting in less teachers and larger class sizes. Both schools would like to have smaller class sizes and more sections of Regents-level classes so the range of ability within the class is smaller. The Ashburn High School counselor, the third high-needs school interviewed, said she would not change anything about the grouping system.

The changes that Greenberg and Jennings want to make to their classes are indicative of both schools' demographics. Both schools are in poor rural areas with little parent involvement and students that are hard to motivate. The problems they are experiencing with budget cuts are issues that higher income schools rarely have to worry about.

The average-needs schools wanted to implement the biggest changes their school's tracking system. The Campanella guidance counselor was passionate about changing the grouping system. She would like to see an open tracking system, similar to that of Ashburn High School, where students can take any class they choose without needing a certain grade pre-requisite. Since stigma about class level is so prevalent at Campanella, the counselor's ideal system is to have a symposium class where students who want to do the extra work to be in honors can attend an extra class a few times a week, but those who do not want to are not required to. Additionally, these students could attend the extra honors class and then drop without penalty if they do not like it. The Campanella counselor hopes

that having an extra class would reduce some of the stigma since students would attend their regular classes with their friends, and then go to their honors symposium in secrecy if they want to.

The guidance counselor at Spalding was passionate about making changes to the tracking system as well. Since Spalding High School includes seventh and eighth grade students in addition to the typical ninth through twelfth grade levels, she feels students are tracked too early. The counselor wished the school's system had a more concrete way of tracking students, similar to that of Simmons. She feels that parents pressure their students to take honors classes when they do not belong there, so she would like if a certain grade point average were required to move up to and remain in honors.

These two average-needs schools' counselors have drastically different opinions regarding the changes they want to make to their tracking system. Campanella would like to make their system more flexible while Spalding wants to implement stricter rules. Campanella likes the Ashburn model where students can take any classes they choose, resulting in little stigma among the students. On the other hand, the Spalding counselor wishes they had the Simmons system where strictly enforced grade pre-requisites are required to remain in or move up to honors.

The low-needs schools both like their grouping system and would not change anything about it. The Bresnahan counselor feels that the large amount of parents who are knowledgeable about the education process helps keep the grouping process as fair as possible. The Simmons counselor believes that their tracking system is "real to real life" where not everyone goes to the same college or gets the same job because everyone has different abilities and talents. She also feels that the waiver process is fair because it gives

students the opportunity to demonstrate why they should be in a higher-level class and anyone can receive this waiver.

IMPORTANCE OF TRACKING IN HIGH SCHOOLS

All seven guidance counselors interviewed are in support of tracking. They feel it is an important component in each individual student to reach their highest academic potential. However, the degree to which schools want to track varies. The high-needs schools, specifically Ashburn, feel open enrollment in all classes is the best policy, while the low-needs schools, like Simmons, feel that a grade pre-requisite must be present to group students by ability.

When asked if they would ever want their schools to detrack, most of the counselors were against it. Ashburn and Greenberg want to encourage students to take the hardest classes possible, even if that means stepping outside of one's academic comfort zone. However, Greenberg also understands the importance of the honors students being together to achieve the highest type of learning and not be held back by slower students. Jennings, Campanella, and Spalding responded with the same answer: giving students options in their class scheduling and encouraging the honors students to be pushed and challenged is the best system. Finally, the low-needs schools both agreed that students' ability groups should prepare them for their future, so tracking should be retained.

Scholars, especially Jeannie Oakes (2005), are in support of heterogeneous groups for all schools. She writes, "no group of students has been found to benefit consistently from being in a homogeneous group" (2005:7). Detracking would also break down any racial or socioeconomic barriers that exist in schools like Campanella (Cooper 1996:191;

Yonezawa, Wells and Serna 2002:42). However, Oakes and colleagues (1995) bring up another valid point: middle and upper class parents like tracking because it demonstrates a challenging schedule that is beneficial for college-bound students (Wells, Hirshberg, Lipton, and Oakes 1995:23).

All seven guidance counselors would agree that college is a driving factor in tracking. Counselors encourage their students to take the hardest classes possible to build up a strong schedule for college. Even Ashburn, the highest-needs school in the group, has this mentality. The guidance counselor spoke of college Academic Opportunity Programs (AOP) and the competitiveness of these programs. Students who qualify for AOP want to show they challenged themselves and took advantage of their academic opportunities. This is the premise for why Ashburn has open enrollment in all classes, including AP. On the other hand, Simmons also wants its students to challenge themselves as much as possible, but they have grade pre-requisites to enforce students' academic skills and abilities. While the seven counselors may agree with Oakes that homogeneous groups do not benefit students to a tremendous degree, they would never rid of class levels due to the impression they make on college applications.

Even though none of the seven counselors would ever consider detracking, two schools feel tracking is not necessary for every high school. The guidance counselor at Ashburn feels their open enrollment system is not really tracking; yet it is working well for them so it could definitely succeed in other schools. The Campanella counselor believes that good teachers and engaged students will lead to "opportunities for students to learn at whatever level and learn well. All kids are good if you give them the right resources, and this can be done without tracking."

The other five counselors have strong opinions about tracking and feel it is necessary in all high schools. The guidance counselors' reasons for not wanting to detrack are similar to why they feel tracking is advantageous for all schools. Counselors believe that all schools can benefit from grouping students by ability so they can achieve the highest caliber of learning. Tracking also aids students in recognizing their interests and potential future goals, especially for college-bound students. The Bresnahan counselor feels tracking is important because "there is a wide variety of students, so it helps both the low and high end students" so no one gets lost in the shuffle. The Greenberg High School counselor believes that tracking "motivates Regents students to work harder and achieve higher."

Guidance counselors have seen the impact tracking can have on students. When considering the demographics of the schools, it makes sense that Ashburn and Campanella feel tracking is not necessary. Both schools have a wide range of socioeconomic diversity where tracking can (and does at Campanella) create a "school within a school" where the wealthier students are in higher tracks and the lower-income students are in Regents classes. Ashburn has a system to fix this, while Campanella strives for a system like Ashburn's. The Campanella guidance counselor emphasizes resources and teachers, which high and average needs schools struggle to maintain. The other two high-needs schools do not present as much demographic diversity as Campanella and Ashburn do, so they are not as concerned about stigmas and divisions among groups of students. With regard to Spalding, Bresnahan, and Simmons, the guidance counselors believe that tracking is hugely beneficial for college-bound students to demonstrate their greatest abilities and present the most challenging schedule students can handle.

DEMOGRAPHIC PATTERNS THROUGHOUT ABILITY GROUPS

One of the most controversial topics within tracking is that it can create divisions among students of different races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Schools fear that lower-class minority students will enroll in the lower-track classes because they are too intimidated to be in an upper-level class surrounded by high-income students who have been in honors for their entire academic career. The demographic patterns, especially socioeconomic status, throughout ability groups are indicative of the level of needs-to-resources the schools are categorized as.

High-Needs-to-Resources Schools: "It is a challenge to motivate these students"

Ashburn High School is one of the most diverse high schools in upstate New York. It contains students from over forty different countries, causing Ashburn to have a large percentage of English language learners (ELL). The guidance counselor noted that the issue with ELL is the language barrier: they have the abilities to succeed, but language gets in the way. Since ELL students can only have three ELL classes, they are often placed in other classes where they do not understand the material due to the language barrier. The counselor emphasizes how difficult it is to have so many such students in one school, especially when most of the teachers only speak English. She also recalled how ELL students typically take more time to graduate since they struggle to pass their Regents exams.

In addition to ethnic diversity, Ashburn also has socioeconomic diversity. As the counselor pointed out, "we have the sons and daughters of lawyers and doctors and judges that go to school with the sons and daughters of crack heads." She mentioned a clear divide

between the upper and lower class students, with the upper-class students with professional parents striving to achieve more and go to college while the lower-class students are often just trying to get by. However, because Ashburn has open class enrollment, the academic levels generally have a balanced mixture of upper and lower class students.

One problem that Ashburn and Greenberg in particular experience is attendance. Both counselors used the same scenario to explain their struggle: a high school student has to walk their younger sibling to school, the high school student has missed the bus and has no other way of getting to school, so the student is late for school causing him to miss the majority of first period, so he will fail that class. This situation is a vicious cycle that districts are trying to help, but struggle due to budget cuts. Greenberg High School does not send busses within the city limits, so the district's next course of action is to have some system of bussing within these two miles of the school so students do not have to walk every day.

Greenberg's socioeconomic status is low. The counselor notes, "Since everyone here is poor, no one really judges here." There is no upper-class community at Greenberg, only a small middle-class and a large lower class. The honors and AP classes contain just as many lower-class students as the Regents and special education classes do, so students are comfortable enrolling in any ability group that is most appropriate for them. The counselor does notice that, although the majority of students are of lower-class status, honors students more often try to hide their economic status. They are not as open about getting SAT/ACT or AP test waivers because they do not want to be seen as poor. Regents-level students, however, are open about fee waivers.

The final high-needs school that experiences economic struggles is Jennings High School. The guidance counselor stated, "It is a challenge to motivate these students. Students do not grasp the concept that they can leave this community and go to college." Oftentimes, the traditional high school day is not ideal for these students: they would rather do hands-on activities rather than sitting in a desk listening to lectures all day. Unfortunately, elective classes were eliminated due to budget cuts, causing non-academically motivated students to dislike school even more. Similar to Greenberg, the honors students come from slightly wealthier families than the Regents-level students. Overall, the struggle at Jennings is motivating students to take harder classes. Unfortunately, the guidance counselor cannot force students into classes, so students continue to take Regents-level classes when they should be excelling in honors classes.

In all three schools, parent involvement is a significant issue. Fewer parents come to school events than in wealthier districts. Parents in these districts are less inclined to return phone calls or emails from the guidance counselor. The Jennings counselor feels that "parents are not pushing their kids to do as much as they can," causing the students to be lazy and put in minimal effort. Additionally, students tend to look at their parents for their future goals: if the parents graduated high school and college and have a professional-level job, the students will be more academically motivated than those whose parents dropped out of high school. While the counselors try their hardest to encourage the lower-class students, it is difficult. In the end, the counselors have to adhere to what the students want, and if they prefer coasting by in Regents-level classes, then counselors will schedule them for those classes.

Average-Needs-to-Resources Schools: "The have's and the have not's"

Campanella and Spalding are the two average-needs-to-resources schools that were visited. While they are both average-needs schools, the socioeconomic diversity within classes is drastically different. On one hand is Campanella where class-status greatly divides students into distinct tracks, whereas Spalding experiences economic diversity in all academic track levels.

As the Campanella counselor says, "There are the have's and the have not's." She describes a similar scene that Oakes illustrates: the lower-class students have a stigma attached to them that they are not smart, so they do not try as hard and believe they cannot keep up with the upper-class honors students. A component that adds to the lack of mobility is that students at Campanella are tracked in middle school in math and science. The counselor stated that the low-tracked students have been in those classes for years, so by the time they get to high school they think they belong in the less advanced classes.

With regard to the upper-class students, they take harder classes because they want to follow in their parents' footsteps. "They have a different level of expectation and opportunity," the Campanella counselor notes about the honors students, "The children of professional parents are expected to go to college," and this expectation is not present with the lower-class students. Poorer students, similar to Ashburn, Greenberg, and Jennings, do not have the resources that upper-class students' do. They may lack books, technology, and transportation, preventing students from staying after school. The Campanella counselor notes that poverty spreads into students' entire lives, both in school and at home.

Another reason why lower-class students at Campanella do not want to take advanced classes is due to the testing fee. Students can take as many advanced placement

classes as they would like, but they have to pay for the exam in May. The AP test costs eighty-seven dollars and the fee waiver brings the test down to twenty-two dollars. The problem is that students do not want to ask for the waiver because they want to hide their socioeconomic status. They feel it is better to not take the AP class so they can avoid a waiver rather than challenge themselves and ask for financial assistance.

However, Spalding High School students are quite open about receiving fee waivers. Spalding is a small public school: it has between four and seven hundred students in grades seven through twelve. The Spalding counselor felt that since the school is so small, students feel comfortable asking for fee waivers, describing it as “a non-issue.” This trend of students’ not caring about their class-status extends into the classroom. “Students want to excel and do not feel intimidated by others,” reported the guidance counselor, “Their goal is to succeed and nothing holds them back.” Students’ comfort with their class-status can be attributed to the small student population and the integrated environment that has always been present at Spalding.

Although Campanella and Spalding are both average-needs schools, their socioeconomic patterns in ability groups are drastically different. A noteworthy contributor is the size of the school and the fee-waiver. Spalding has fewer students per grade than Campanella does, which the counselor feels attributes to students’ comfort regarding fee-waivers. Campanella is the only school of the seven where there is a clear divide between students in Regents-level and honors classes.

Low-Needs-to-Resources Schools: "We have a pretty tight system"

Bresnahan and Simmons High School are high-achieving schools where over ninety-five percent of students attend a two or four-year college after graduation. Families move to these school districts so their children can attend the best schools. Both Bresnahan and Simmons have student populations of over one thousand students; yet they have the highest graduation and college attendance rates of the other five schools.

The Bresnahan guidance counselor recognizes the socioeconomic challenges that schools like Campanella experience. Although Bresnahan has little socioeconomic diversity, the counselor notes that the wealthier students take more advanced classes and the less-affluent students play it safe with Regents level courses. Even though this pattern exists slightly at Bresnahan, the average grade for students in all course levels is an eighty-seven percent, so it appears that most students are taking classes that are appropriate for their ability level.

The Bresnahan counselor takes pride in the school's tracking system. She feels that students feel comfortable taking the class that is most appropriate to them because the teachers, parents, and guidance counselors work together as a team to accurately place each student where he or she would achieve to the best of his or her ability. The counselor compares tracking to electricity, saying, "it is crucial, you have to have it, but people do not really recognize it until the lights go out. It is one of those vital things in schools and we are fortunate that we have a pretty tight system." Bresnahan has figured out how to keep the school's lights on, and each individual student's personal bulb as bright as possible.

Simmons High School has a unique ability grouping system. Students must attain a specific numerical grade to move up to an honors class. Even with the grade pre-requisites,

students of all backgrounds work hard to advance to higher-level classes. The guidance counselor expressed that some of her best students are minority students. “The grade prerequisite is helpful because it determines where students should be,” the counselor said. Students know which level classes they should take based on their grades, so students of all backgrounds feel comfortable taking harder classes if their grades indicate that they can.

Another contributing component to the academic success of Bresnahan and Simmons is the parents. Parents are actively involved in both schools. Since these schools are located in more affluent areas, few parents experience the transportation and technology struggles that the other districts do. Both counselors acknowledge the role parents play in their child’s academics. Parents at Bresnahan and Simmons want their children to achieve the best education possible and are willing to discuss the school’s system to ensure its success.

THE IMPACT OF TRACKING ON TEACHERS

Finley (1984), Kilgore (1991), and Oakes (2005) address the role teachers play in choosing which classes students take. They believe that teachers are significant players in the courses students are enrolled in and that teachers placed in lower-tracks exert less effort and do not care as much for the students. However, these seven upstate New York guidance counselors have drastically different opinions on how their teachers handle tracking.

The guidance counselors report that the teachers like tracking. Counselors recognize that it is easier to teach students that are at the same ability level. Conversely, teaching a variety of track levels involves more lesson planning for teachers. When asked if

tracking makes teachers' jobs easier or more difficult, five of the counselors felt it made their job both easier and more difficult, one said harder, and the other said easier.

The most diversity in this question was among the high-needs schools. The Greenberg counselor feels tracking makes a teacher's job harder, the Jennings counselor believes it is easier for teachers to teach homogeneous groups, and the Ashburn counselor supposes it does both. Since one teacher at Greenberg can teach an AP, Regents, and special education level all in one day, it can be difficult for the teacher to adjust his or her teaching style based on the group being taught. In this way, tracking makes a teacher's job more difficult. The Jennings counselor feels differently, stating that tracking allows teachers to focus their teaching to a specific ability level and can create a really specialized schedule. Interestingly, the counselors gave the same reason for how tracking can impact a teacher's job, except Greenberg's counselor felt this was negative impact while Jennings believes it is beneficial.

The Ashburn High School guidance counselor is the only counselor in a high-needs school that believes tracking can make teachers' jobs both easier and harder. This opinion is synonymous with that of the other four schools. In every high school, the teachers teach a variety of class levels. For example, a biology teacher could teach one AP biology class, two Regents biology classes, and one special education applied biology class. Counselors believe that teaching a plethora of ability groups is a common point of difficulty because teachers have to prepare differently for each class level. However, grouping by ability does make teachers' jobs easier because they can better cater to each group of students. These two responses were similar among the five counselors that feel tracking makes teachers' jobs easier and more difficult.

Guidance counselors felt that teachers' personalities indicate which classes they prefer to teach. Both average-needs schools state that teachers would rather teach the honors and AP level students, while the high-needs and low-needs schools believe that the teachers' personalities suggest class preferences. The Simmons counselor indicates, "Both [honors and Regents level] are rewarding in their own way, so it really just depends on the teacher." This answer directly applies to the other four schools that have the same opinion as the Simmons counselor. Bresnahan and Jennings' counselors noted that teachers like to teach the type of students that they were in high schools, so teachers who struggled enjoy teaching less academic students that resemble themselves. Similarly, teachers who were high achieving and loved school prefer to teach the highly motivated students.

An unfortunate factor that is currently influencing which ability groups teachers want to teach is the New York State Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR). The APPR grades teachers based on how many students pass the Regents exam. Honors and AP teachers do not worry about their rank since their students' skill level is above that required for the Regents. On the other hand, special education, ELL, and Regents-level teachers worry about their APPR score because their students are less likely to pass the exams. The Greenberg and Simmons counselors do not believe that APPR is an accurate evaluation of teachers, noting that the reason for students failing Regents exams is not necessarily poor teaching.

Overall, the scholarly data addressing teachers' role in students' ability groups is drastically different than the opinions of these seven guidance counselors. The counselors feel that teachers generally enjoy teaching all classes because they understand that their main goal is to help students succeed and reach their highest potential. As the Greenberg

counselor states, "Teachers know what they are here for. They do not make excuses, they just try their best." This seems to be the general mindset amongst the teachers at all of the schools, showing that teachers want what is best for the students, not themselves.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

All of the guidance counselors interviewed like their school's tracking process because it is both efficient and equitable. They all feel it is fair to the student population that is represented in their school. They believe ability grouping allows students to achieve the highest quality of learning and helps teachers cater their lessons to a specific group of students. Although tracking makes scheduling harder and involves more class preparation work for teachers, guidance counselors cannot imagine their schools without ability groups.

The two most opposite approaches to ability grouping are Ashburn and Simmons High School. Ashburn has open enrollment where anyone can take any class they please regardless of previous grades or teacher recommendations. On the other hand, Simmons has strict grade pre-requisites that students must acquire in order to move up to or remain in an advanced level. Neither guidance counselor can imagine having the opposite system. A reason for this is the demographics. The Ashburn counselor believes that open enrollment helps prevent ethnic and socioeconomic status separation to avoid having a school within a school. Simmons High School has little diversity and is part of a wealthier district, so they do not have to worry about racial or economic discrimination between classes.

The ability grouping systems at each high school coincides with the demographics of the schools. The guidance counselors encourage all of their students to take the most difficult classes they can handle so the highest level of learning can be achieved. A factor that plays into the classes students take is their family background. The more academically inclined students have parents in professional level jobs while the less motivated students have parents who work in lower end jobs that may have not graduated high school or college. The high-needs counselors note how frustrating it can be to motivate students academically, and although they want students to try harder classes, they must listen to the students' wishes, even if that means taking easier classes.

In closing, guidance counselors believe tracking is beneficial to students and each grouping system addresses the particular demographics of the school. They believe it is advantageous for the students and teachers, who are ultimately the most significant part of high school students' educations. These guidance counselors like their tracking system and do not plan on making considerable changes anytime soon.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH QUESTION

The purpose of this study is to evaluate high school guidance counselors' opinions of tracking and ability grouping as it pertains to their high school. According to scholars, including Hallinan (1994 and 1996), Lucas (1999, 2001, and 2002), Oakes (2005), and Wells (1995 and 2002), grouping students by ability results in the separation of students based on their race and socioeconomic status. Oftentimes, lower-class-minority students enroll in the regular-level classes while the upper-class-white students dominate the honors and advanced placement courses. While scholars have discussed detracking as a solution, they believe that parents of college-bound students will reject this idea because these students will not be able to display a rigorous schedule if everyone is enrolled in the same classes.

High school guidance counselors were interviewed because they are the bridge between parents, students, teachers, and the administration. They are primarily responsible for students' schedules and future plans after high school graduation. Seven counselors were interviewed: three from high-needs-to-resources schools, two from average-needs-to-resources schools, and two from low-needs-to-resources schools. While some high schools' tracking systems were more flexible, all seven schools grouped students by ability to some extent. The objective of this research is to determine if tracking and ability grouping should continue in high schools, or if it is not necessary for students to reach their highest academic potential.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

All seven of the guidance counselors liked their school's tracking and ability grouping system. While some would make minor changes, they all feel their system is fair and overall beneficial to students. The guidance counselors believe that grouping students by ability allows students to reach their highest potential. By having a group of students in one class that are at a certain level, whether that be honors or special education level, it allows the teacher to focus the class so students can grasp the most amount of information. Ability grouping enables students to challenge themselves at in a class level that is appropriate to them.

The reasons for ability grouping even applies to the two schools with the most drastically different tracking systems: Ashburn and Simmons. According to the Ashburn guidance counselor, the school had never had a strict tracking system, so students of all economic and ethnic backgrounds always felt comfortable taking any class level. The open enrollment system encourages students to move class levels freely. On the other hand, Simmons has a grade pre-requisite system in place where students' grades are used to determine which class levels they should enroll in. However, if students are a few points away from the necessary grade point average, they have the option to fill out a waiver to move up. The Ashburn counselor feels that creating a comfortable, open environment encourages students to change class levels as appropriate while the Simmons counselor believes that grade pre-requisites indicate which classes are fitting for each student. Both counselors feel their systems encourage students to work hard and enroll in the classes that allow them to excel.

The fact that each of the counselors likes their ability grouping system and feels it is fair and beneficial to the students and teachers is an indication that the grouping method will remain in these seven schools. All seven counselors were aware of the opposing argument to eliminate grouping by ability, yet when asked if they would ever detrack, they all said no. Some counselors recognized the advantages of heterogeneous grouping. The Greenberg counselor, “can see both sides,” of the tracking argument since it “would help the regents students,” but a problem could be, “the honors kids may speak up more and then create a different type of classroom environment where some students just sit back while others run the class.” Ultimately, the Greenberg counselor felt that Regents-level students would learn better if upper-level students did not overshadow them.

Another issue with detracking is presenting a strong, rigorous schedule to colleges. If all students are in the same classes, their schedules present no challenges, which will not stand out to college admissions. This is why all seven schools have both heterogeneous and homogeneous electives where students of all ability levels are mixed. A third reason why counselors do not want to detrack is for the teachers. This was a main concern for the Bresnahan counselor, who continuously referenced a “student at a twelfth grade reading level in the same class as a student who reads at a second grade level. It is incredibly difficult for a teacher to teach both of these students in the same classroom. For these students to reach their highest potential, they need to be in different classes.” Cooper (1996) and Wells, Hirshberg, Lipton and Oakes (1995) note that parents believe heterogeneous groups will cause teachers to “dumb down” lessons to accommodate for the slower learners. However, these counselors state that students in heterogeneous classes will advance the class on their own, resulting in struggling learners to be less engaged.

The seven guidance counselors understand potential benefits of detracking and the support that scholars present to do away with ability grouping. However, these counselors do not anticipate getting rid of grouping students by ability, the main reason being that students want to create the strongest schedule possible to present to colleges. High School administrators must also appeal to parents who, especially in upper-class areas, want more advanced classes taught so their children can enroll in the most challenging classes and present a difficult schedule to colleges.

ANALYZING PREVIOUS RESEARCH

This research has shown how crucial guidance counselors are in high school ability grouping. When asked what their role is in organizing students' into classes, they all said scheduling. Counselors work with students by discussing any recommendations that were given and noting what students want given their previous grades, future goals, and current interests. It is the counselor who puts all of the pieces together so students can have the most appropriate schedule that is catered to each individual student.

One complaint about track mobility mentioned by Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna (2002) was that parents are often uninformed about the education system. They mention that upper-class parents tend to discuss the school system, including who the best teachers are, which classes are the most challenging, and any institutional changes that are made within the school (39). Guidance counselors at high-needs schools admit that the parents tend to be less involved in their children's' academics. However, guidance counselors work to keep parents in the loop. The Ashburn, Greenberg, and Jennings counselors all send students' future schedules home to parents and parents are encouraged to contact the

counselor if they have any questions. At Jennings High School, the guidance counselor even writes a monthly newsletter that is sent home to parents so they can stay connected to the school. These counselors also understand that parents in low-income communities often work multiple jobs and cannot leave work to attend school meetings, resulting in less information being presented to parents. While Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna (2002) are correct that lower-class parents are less informed about the education system, the interviews show that guidance counselors are trying to improve this.

Another issue that Finley (1984), Kilgore (1991), Lucas (1999) and Oakes (2005) present is that teachers want to instruct the high-level classes and purposely avoid teaching low-track students. When asked which course levels teachers prefer to teach, five of the seven guidance counselors said that it depends on the teachers' personality. The Bresnahan counselor notes, "Some teachers have a background that they want to share with students. So, if they struggled in school, they want to teach those students, or if they were highly academic, they probably want the honors and AP students." The Simmons counselor discussed teachers feeling rewarded, saying, "The challenge of teaching basic and Regents students is great and rewarding. On the flip side, it is also rewarding for AP teachers to watch their students produce incredible work." The two counselors that think their teachers prefer to teach the honors-level students also said that teachers know they are there to teach and will educate the students they are assigned to without complaining. These guidance counselors would reject the scholars' theory that teachers avoid teaching low-track students, especially since there are teachers that specifically request those students.

Lastly, House and Hayes (2002), Lee and Ekstrom (1987), and Lucas (1999) discuss the role of high school guidance counselors, noting that counselors frequently work with administrators, teachers, and parents more than the students, and that students often do not feel comfortable discussing their classes with their guidance counselor. The two low-needs schools recognize that they have many meetings with people other than students, but according to the Simmons counselor, the board of education, superintendent, and principal approach guidance counselors specifically because they have the most data. These counselors try to make these meetings after school, but do understand that these conferences can take time away from meeting with students.

Lee and Ekstrom (1987) also note that guidance counselors tend to focus more on the two ends: special education students and honors college-bound students. The three high-needs school counselors mentioned the large amount of special education student populations while the other four schools did not. However, it makes sense that the Ashburn, Greenberg, and Jennings counselors would focus more on special education students: these are the least independent students that need the most guidance in both academic and daily activities. With regard to the college-bound students, guidance counselors want to help students achieve their goals, whether it is college, working, going into the military, or just graduating high school. They have the resources to help all students and do not focus on one particular group.

The final criticism about guidance counselors is that students do not feel comfortable discussing their classes with them. This is not an issue at any of the schools since the guidance counselors' meet with every single student about his or her future schedule. Most counselors meet with one student or a small group of students for an entire

class period (about forty-five minutes). Students are required to discuss their classes with their counselor, especially since the counselor makes the final schedule. Without meeting with the counselor, students would not have a schedule.

Guidance counselors have a difficult, yet important job. They work hard to keep parents informed about the education system, even in neighborhoods where parents are not readily accessible. Counselors must also keep track of the school's data, including graduation rates, post-graduate plan percentages, and class grade point averages. The most difficult and most rewarding part of their job is knowing how to work with each individual student, from the students who can barely speak English to those who want to attend one of the best colleges in the country.

THE FUTURE OF ABILITY GROUPING

According to many scholars, tracking appears to have a questionable future. However, these seven guidance counselors do not want ability grouping to leave high schools any time soon. As the Ashburn counselor nicely states, "The idea [of ability grouping] is to keep the kids in the same level so the higher level kids are challenged and the middle level kids are not lost." The second component of tracking is for the teacher. The Campanella counselor summarizes this well, saying, "A lot of it is for the teachers to tailor their methods to a specific group of students." All seven counselors would agree with these two statements, and because they believe so strongly in the ideologies behind both assertions, guidance counselors will continue to be in support of ability grouping.

Many scholars note the socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic segregation that can occur as a result of tracking. With the exception of Ashburn High School, none of the schools are

ethnically or racially diverse. However, the Ashburn counselor expressed little racial and ethnic separation between classes; students of all backgrounds feel comfortable enrolling in any class level. With regard to economic segregation amongst course levels, four of the seven schools feel that upper-middle-class students are more likely to take honors and AP classes than lower-class students. While this gap is present, the four counselors said it is a small gap that has decreased each year. Interestingly, the counselors that mentioned this gap were from Greenberg, Jennings, Campanella, and Bresnahan, representing schools from all needs-to-resource levels. While scholars would expect this gap to just be present in low-income communities, it actually exists in a variety of economic areas.

With regard to guidance counselors' roles in ability grouping, they should continue to meet with each individual student and encourage them to take the most challenging classes they are comfortable with. As the Greenberg counselor pointed out, "we always challenge students to take the hardest courses possible, even though they are very resistant sometimes." All of the counselors said it is easier to move down a course level during the year, so students should try the honors class and always have the option to move down if they need to. This encouragement should continue for all counselors.

Overall, these seven guidance counselors do an excellent job at considering all participants (teachers, parents, special education professionals) when students are creating their schedules. They always keep students in the center and work to compromise if there is discretion between students and parents. These guidance counselors are understanding of students' future goals and take the necessary steps to lead them in the direction they want to go in.

Given what some of the counselors have said about honors classes, one suggestion could be to not limit the number of honors classes. Oftentimes, there are a limited number of honors and AP sections offered, making upward mobility more difficult. The Simmons guidance counselor noticed a pattern: since the AP classes have the smallest class size, students who are consistently in the AP track have an advantage in being placed in those classes, making it most difficult for a student who wants to move from an honors to an AP class to do so. If Simmons offered another AP class in that particular subject, then more students could challenge themselves and take those classes.

Another concern among scholars and some of the guidance counselors interviewed was tracking too early. The Spalding counselor noted that early tracking places students in ability groups very quickly and she does not feel it is necessary to track that young. She would prefer if the school started grouping students by ability in tenth grade rather than in seventh because “it is important for students to learn from each other in the younger grades.” All seven schools had some form of heterogeneous groups, especially in electives. Maintaining these mixed-level groups allows students to work with peers they would not normally interact with. By allowing a variety of homogeneous and heterogeneous classes, students can still intermingle and challenge themselves in certain subjects.

Lastly, guidance counselors should continuously inform parents, teachers, and administrators about tracking and ability grouping. They should make administrators aware of any achievement gaps that are present among tracks and communicate with teachers on the benefits and disadvantages of tracking. Counselors should also keep parents up to date on school academic opportunities in high school and after students graduate. Especially in low-income communities, parents are less informed about their

children's academics. Since meetings tend to be scarcely attended, writing a newsletter or sending a weekly email to parents could be more beneficial. The more guidance counselors can educate parents on their child's academics, the more encouraging parents can be towards their child to excel, and hopefully these students will become more academically motivated to succeed.

ADVICE TO STUDENTS AND PARENTS ON TRACKING AND ABILITY GROUPING

Many guidance counselors noted the difficulties that arise with parents when students are choosing their schedules. While guidance counselors acknowledge that the parents ultimately know their children the best, counselors wished that parents would consider teacher and counselor recommendations more before requesting that their child switch classes. A common problem is that parents want their children in more advanced classes than what teachers and counselors recommend. Parents should trust teachers and counselors: they know what the student is capable of and they have the student's best interests in mind. As the Spalding counselor stated, "It is better that a student is challenged in a regular level class and receives an A- than being in an honors class and receiving a C+." Parents should listen and consider why their child is placed in a certain class level rather than just jumping to conclusions and making a course level change that may not be beneficial.

Students should also listen to teacher recommendations and their guidance counselor. If a teacher and counselor encourage students to move up a class level, they should try the more advanced class. After all, teachers would not recommend a student to move class levels if they did not feel that student was capable of succeeding. Students

should also have confidence in their academic abilities. All of the guidance counselors mentioned that students follow a comparable high school graduate plan to their parents. Students whose parents are in professional jobs are more likely to attend college, and students whose parents work in a minimum wage job and did not even try to enroll in college will follow a similar path. Students should listen to their guidance counselors' encouragement to pursue higher education or become trained in a job that does not require college. Guidance counselors are often students' biggest advocates for post-graduate plans, and students should have confidence in what their counselors are telling them they can achieve.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Tracking and ability grouping plays a significant role in high school education. This project only investigated the guidance counselors' role in this process. The next step would be to discuss tracking and ability grouping with teachers. Teachers would provide insight into what it is like to teach homogeneous and heterogeneous classes and if they would ever consider detracking. Teachers could also discuss students' motivation levels, which is an important indicator of which classes students want to take. Students could also be interviewed and asked if they like being tracked or if they would prefer mixed-level classes. They could also reflect upon any grouping patterns within their own school.

The schools in this study were economically diverse but not very racially varied. This study could continue to interview guidance counselors at more racially and ethnically mixed schools to note if segregations patterns exist as scholars suggest they do.

Additionally, researching high schools of similar demographics but in urban, suburban, and rural districts would enhance research findings.

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Appendix A: New York State Education Report Cards for Seven Counties and Forty-Nine Districts for 2011-2012 School Year

County	District	School	# of Students Enrolled	% Students Eligible for Free Lunch	% Students Receiving Reduced Priced Lunch	% American Indian or Alaskan Native	% Black or African American	% Hispanic or Latino	% Asian or Native Hawaiian	% White	% Multi racial	Low, Middle or High Need %	Similar Schools Category #
Albany	Albany City School District	Albany High School	2236	45	5	0	57	12	8	22	1	129.6	45
Albany	Berne-Knox-Westerlo Central School District	Berne-Knox-Westerlo Junior-Senior High School (grades 6-12)	525	41	12	0	1	1	1	97	0	24.8	50
Albany	Bethlehem Central School District	Bethlehem Central Senior High School	1671	5	2	0	2	3	5	90	1	2.6	52
Albany	Cohoes City School District	Cohoes High School	606	43	9	0	9	4	2	83	2	76.9	44
Albany	Guilderland Central School District	Guilderland High School	1721	4	2	0	4	2	7	86	1	6.6	53
Albany	North Colonie Central School District	Shaker High School	2080	8	3	0	8	3	9	80	1	11.3	53
Albany	Ravena-Coeymans-Selkirk Central School District	Ravena-Coeymans-Selkirk Senior High School	646	23	7	0	5	5	0	89	0	29.8	50
Albany	South Colonie Central School District	Colonie Central High School	1755	12	4	0	8	5	6	79	2	11.9	49
Albany	Voorheesville Centria School District	Clayton A Bouton High School	395	4	4	1	2	2	3	92	1	6.8	53
Albany	Watervliet City School District	Watervliet Junior-Senior High School (grades 7-12)	655	47	14	0	19	7	4	67	2	81.4	44
Fulton	Broadalbin-Perth Central School District	Broadalbin-Perth High School	568	20	5	0	2	0	1	97	0	23.1	50
Fulton	Gloversville City School District	Gloversville High School	914	36	10	0	5	3	1	90	2	49.3	47
Fulton	Johnstown City School District	Johnstown Senior High School	673	27	7	0	3	1	1	95	0	37.2	46
Fulton	Mayfield Central School District	Mayfield Junior/Senior High School (grades 7-12)	470	17	7	0	1	1	0	97	1	33.9	50
Fulton	Northville Central School District	Northville High School (grades 7-12)	252	50	11	1	1	0	1	97	0	28.1	50
Montgomery	Amsterdam City School District	Amsterdam High School	1110	38	5	0	5	32	1	62	0	37.2	46
Montgomery	Canajoharie Central School District	Canajoharie Senior High School	344	27	10	0	2	0	0	98	0	40.4	46

County	District	School	# of Students Enrolled	% Students Eligible for Free Lunch	% Students Receiving Reduced Priced Lunch	% American Indian or Alaskan Native	% Black or African American	% Hispanic or Latino	% Asian or Native Hawaiian	% White	% Multi racial	Low, Middle or High Need %	Similar Schools Category #
Montgomery	Fonda-Fultonville Central School District	Fonda-Fultonville Senior high School	456	22	8	0	0	0	1	96	0	25.4	50
Montgomery	Fort Plain Central School District	Fort Plain Junior-Senior High School (grades 7-12)	367	37	9	0	1	2	0	91	5	42.6	46
Rensselaer	Averill Park Central School District	Averill Park High School	1111	8	4	0	1	1	2	97	0	12.2	49
Rensselaer	Berlin Central School District	Berlin High School	256	20	16	0	1	0	0	97	1	44.5	51
Rensselaer	Brunswick Central School District (Brittonkill)	Tamarac Middle School High School (grades 6-12)	755	19	8	0	2	1	1	96	0	14	49
Rensselaer	East Freenbush Central School District	Columbia High School	1482	12	5	0	3	4	2	88	3	5.4	49
Rensselaer	Hoosic Valley Central School District	Hoosic Valley Senior High School	381	29	12	0	1	0	0	98	1	18.3	50
Rensselaer	Hoosick Falls Central School District	Hoosick Falls Junior/Senior high School (grades 7-12)	590	58	16	0	1	1	1	97	1	47.1	51
Rensselaer	Lansingburgh Central School District	Lansingburgh Senior High School	790	39	6	0	24	9	1	65	2	63.8	44
Rensselaer	Rensselaer City School District	Rensselaer Junior/Senior High School (grades 7-12)	433	88	18	1	14	6	10	68	2	90.9	45
Rensselaer	Schodack Central School District	Maple Hill High School	371	12	4	0	2	3	1	94	0	20.7	50
Rensselaer	Troy City School District	Troy High School	1268	47	8	0	35	11	1	52	0	67.3	44
Saratoga	Ballston Spa Central School District	Ballston Spa Senior High School	1350	16	4	0	2	0	1	96	0	21.1	50
Saratoga	Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake Central School District	Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake Senior High School	1148	4	3	0	1	1	1	97	0	5	49
Saratoga	Corinth Central School District	Corinth High School	392	24	5	0	2	1	1	96	0	24.5	50
Saratoga	Galway Central School District	Galway Junior/Senior High School (grades 7-12)	529	16	6	0	1	2	0	97	0	17.6	50

County	District	School	# of Students Enrolled	% Students Eligible for Free Lunch	% Students Receiving Reduced Priced Lunch	% American Indian or Alaskan Native	% Black or African American	% Hispanic or Latino	% Asian or Native Hawaiian	% White	% Multi racial	Low, Middle or High Need %	Similar Schools Category #
Saratoga	Mechanicville City School District	Mechanicville Junior/Senior High School (grades 6-12)	689	22	6	0	1	2	1	96	1	11.1	49
Saratoga	Saratoga Springs City School District	Saratoga Springs High School	2063	12	3	0	3	2	2	92	1	13.4	49
Saratoga	Schuylerville Central School District	Schuylerville Junior-Senior High School (grades 7-12)	875	16	9	0	2	3	1	95	0	34.7	50
Saratoga	Shenendehowa Central School District	Shenendehowa High School	2974	7	3	0	3	3	5	88	1	10.6	49
Saratoga	South Glens Falls Central School District	South Glens Falls Senior High School	1018	9	5	0	1	1	0	97	0	16	50
Saratoga	Stillwater Central School District	Stillwater Middle School High School (grades 6-12)	705	18	4	0	2	1	0	97	0	21.9	50
Saratoga	Waterford-Halfmoon Unio Free School District	Waterford Junior-Senior High School (grades 7-12)	382	31	7	0	2	2	2	93	2	43.5	51
Schenectady	Duanesburg Central School District	Duanesburg High School	289	48	12	0	1	3	0	96	0	13.6	49
Schenectady	Niskayuna Central School District	Niskayuna High School	1380	6	1	0	4	2	10	84	0	4.1	53
Schenectady	Rotterdam-Mohonasen Central School District	Mohonasen Senior High School	1033	18	9	0	5	2	2	90	0	8.9	49
Schenectady	Schalmont Central School District	Schalmont High School	631	11	4	0	3	2	2	93	0	8.6	49
Schenectady	Schenectady City School District	Schenectady High School	2665	58	10	0	33	15	17	35	0	78.9	44
Schenectady	Scotia-Glenville Central School District	Scotia-Glenville Senior High School	884	13	6	0	4	3	2	92	0	11.2	49
Schoharie	Cobleskill-Richmond Central School District	Cobleskill-Richmond High School	612	28	7	0	1	3	1	94	0	45.7	51
Schoharie	Middleburge Central School District	Middleburgh High School	283	23	13	0	1	2	1	96	0	45.5	46
Schoharie	Schoharie Central School District	Schoharie High School (grades 7-12)	400	33	7	0	1	1	0	98	1	42	51

Appendix B: Similar Schools Identified by District and School Demographics Based off of 2002-2003 Academic Year

Description of Schools in Similar Group #44, 45, 46, and 47

Albany High School, Amsterdam High School, Canajoharie Senior High School, Cohoes High School, Fort Plains Junior-Senior High School, Gloversville High School, Johnstown Senior High School, Lasingburgh Senior High School, Middleburgh High School, Rensselaer Junior/Senior High School, Schenectady High School, Troy High School, Watervliet Junior Senior High School,

- All schools in this group are secondary level schools school districts with high student needs in relation to district resources.
- Student Needs Statistic for these schools ranges from 27.4 to 314.5
- Three schools were interviewed from this list

Description of Schools in Similar Group #49, 50, and 51

Averill Park High School, Ballston Spa Senior High School, Berlin High School, Berne-Knox-Westerlo Junior-Senior High School, Broadalbin-Perth High School, Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake Senior High School, Colonie Central High School, Cobleskill-Richmond High School, Columbia High School, Corinth High School, Duanesburg High School, Fonda-Fultonville Senior High School, Galway Junior/Senior High School, Hoosic Valley Senior High School, Hoosick Falls Junior/Senior High School, Maple Hill High School, Mayfield Junior/Senior High School, Mechanicville Junior/Senior High School, Mohonasen Senior High School, Northville High School, Ravena-Coeymans-Selkirk Senior High School, Saratoga Springs High School, Schalmont High School, Schoharie High School, Scotia-Glenville Senior High School, Schuylerville Junior-Senior High School, Shenendehowa High School, South Glens Falls Senior High School, Stillwater Central School District, Tamarac Middle and High School, Waterford Junior-Senior High School

- All schools in this group are secondary level schools in school districts with average student needs in relation to district resource capacity.
- Student Needs Statistic for these schools ranges from 2.9 to 84.4
- Two schools were interviewed from this list

Description of Schools in Similar Group #52 and 53

Bethlehem Central Senior High School, Clayton A Bouton High School, Guilderland High School, Niskayuna High School, Shaker High School

- All schools in this group are secondary level schools in school districts with low student needs in relation to district resource capacity.
- Student Needs Statistic for these schools ranges from 0.0 to 11.3
- Two schools were interviewed from this list

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

My name is Marisa Underberger, and I am a senior at Union College in Schenectady, NY. I am inviting you to participate in my sociology senior thesis research study. Involvement in the study is voluntary, so you may choose to participate or not. A description of the study is written below.

As an aspiring guidance counselor, I am interested in learning about guidance counselors' opinions of tracking and ability grouping in high schools, mainly the advantages and disadvantages of tracking. You will be asked to answer questions on ability grouping as it pertains to the school you work in. None of these questions ask for personal information on students, parents, teachers or administrators at your school. This will take approximately one hour. If you no longer wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from the study, without penalty, at any time.

Your responses will be held confidential but not anonymous. This means that your name and responses will be linked in data files retained by me (the researcher), but with few exceptions, and I promise not to divulge this information.

By signing below, you indicate that you understand the information above, and that you wish to participate in this research study.

Participant Signature
Date

Printed Name

You may consent to having your interview recorded via tape recorder or you may decline. Please sign your initials by the appropriate statement below to indicate these wishes.

- I consent to being recorded via tape recorder
- I do not consent to being recorded via tape recorder

Appendix D: Interview Questions

1. Please describe how your school organizes students into classes.
 - a. What is your involvement in this process?
 - b. What is the teacher's involvement in this process?
 - c. What is the parent's involvement in this process?
 - d. What is the student's involvement in this process?
 - e. Which one has the most weight in deciding which class students are enrolled in?
2. What do you believe is the general goal/purpose of tracking?
 - a. Do you feel this goal is being achieved?
 - b. How can this goal be better achieved?
3. Is it easy for students to switch class levels? (Is mobility easy?)
 - a. What tends to be the reason for students moving classes?
 - b. What is the process like for students to switch classes?
 - c. Who decides if students should move class levels?
 - d. Is it easier for students to move up a level or down a level? (To move up to honors or down to regular)
4. Do you feel the school's tracking process is fair?
 - a. Why?
 - b. Why not?
 - c. Who do you feel the tracking process benefits the most?
 - d. Hurts the most?
5. What would you change about the school's tracking process?
6. Do you wish your school didn't track?
 - a. Why?
 - b. Why not?
7. In general, do you feel it is important for schools to track?
8. Are there any patterns you have noticed in the tracks at your school?
 - a. Any racial or ethnic patterns?
 - b. Any socioeconomic patterns?
 - c. Does one track receive better grades than another?
9. How are teachers assigned which classes to teach?
10. Do you feel tracking makes a teacher's job easier or more difficult?
 - a. How so?
11. Which tracks do you think teachers like teaching more?
 - a. Why?
 - b. Which classes don't teachers want to teach?
12. How would your job as a school counselor be different if your school did not track?
13. What are the biggest challenges of your job?
 - a. Are any of these challenges a result of tracking?