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# High School Core-Subject Instructors' Perceptions of General Education Track Courses and the Associated Achievement Gap

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High School Core-Subject Instructors' Perceptions of General Education Track Courses  
and the Associated Achievement Gap

by

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of the study is to investigate teacher perceptions of students enrolled in low-level classes. The study will investigate how high school core-subject instructors of general education (low-level) track courses perceive academic tracking and the associated achievement gap; the expectations of high school core-subject instructors who teach general education (low-level) track courses regarding general education students; and how high school core-subject instructors who teach general education (low-level) track courses perceive their ability to teach general education students. Interview questions and classroom observations will be utilized to gather qualitative data in this single method case study. In addition, teacher lessons will be used to triangulate the interview and observation data.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

America's public schools are under increasing pressure to educate students to enter a changing world. In the year 2003, 16 billion dollars were appropriated by the Department of Education to assure that no child is left behind (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was designed to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (Ed.gov 2012). The federal government decided that public education is on a downward spiral, and therefore NCLB mandates that every student in every classroom in every state will have a highly qualified teacher. NCLB supports standard-based education reform based on the concept that educators should set high standards and establish measureable goals to improve student outcomes in education. One of the major reasons for implementing NCLB sprung from the need to strengthen the accountability of public schools regarding achievement for all students. The act sets out criteria and guidelines educators must follow to avoid a state or federal takeover. NCLB put benchmarks, known as adequately yearly progress (AYP), in place to determine success or failure with respect to the mandate and to articulate potential consequences for public schools that fail to meet these benchmarks. However, NCLB supplied educators with few strategies and guidelines to reach the established criteria and the achievement gap continues to grow.

When the need arose for revamping NCLB, Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were implemented to bring about even more accountability for states and to

ensure that states uniformly identify and create common curriculum guides and assessments. The CCSS Initiative is a U.S. education initiative that seeks to bring diverse state curricula into alignment by following the principles of standards-based education reform (CoreStandards, 2010). The standards clearly communicate what is expected of students at each grade level. This is intended to assist teachers to more accurately determine what is needed to help students learn and to establish individualized benchmarks for them. The CCSS focus on core conceptual understandings and procedures starting in the early grades, enabling teachers to take the time needed to teach core concepts and procedures well and to give students the opportunity to master them (CoreStandards, 2010).

### **Background of the Problem**

Many of the mandates set in place by NCLB were attempts to eliminate the achievement gap. The achievement gap in education refers to the disparity in academic performance between groups of students (Davenport & Anderson, 2002). This gap typically appears in student grades, course selections, standardized test scores, dropout rates in schools, and college-completion rates. The achievement gap is often used to describe the distributing performance gaps between Black and Hispanic students, who tend to group together at the lower end of the performance scale, and their non-Hispanic White peers, who tend to group together at the higher end of the scale, as well as the similar academic disparity between students from low-income families and those with more economic resources (*Education Week*). However, true measurement of the gap has not been achieved and the expectation is that CCSS will more effectively establish norms



and criteria for mastery of material and help diminish the racial and economic achievement gap among student demographic groups. A major issue facing America's schools is how to raise test scores and eliminate the academic achievement gap between Black and Hispanic students compared to White students. According to the National Assessment for Education Progress (NAEP), White students outperform Black students in English and mathematics by 13% and 18% respectively (2011).

In an attempt to respond to the mandate of NCLB, public education has explored possibilities to address this problem. As educational leaders began disaggregating student achievement data, the subpar scores of the student subgroup populations were no longer hidden in the larger set of data. These subgroup populations included special education students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs), racial and ethnic minority groups such as Black and Latino, students from lower socioeconomic levels, and English as a Second Language (ESL) students (Overview, 2004). The law's careful scrutiny of subgroup population was a result of growing concern and frustration over failed attempts to close the achievement gap (Overview, 2004; Williams, 2004).

Schools have used various strategies to close the academic achievement gap among students. They have utilized a variety of academic structures including homogeneous grouping, ability grouping, and heterogeneous grouping. Ability grouping is the practice of dividing students for instruction on the basis of their perceived capacities for learning (Oakes, 2005). According to the Balanced View:

Ability grouping can be separated into two distinct groups, and these groups are the most common ones used in schools. Students can be grouped within class which means teachers can place students in small groups according to the academic ability. Students can also be grouped throughout classes in which

students are separated into different classes, courses, or course sequence, known as curricular tracks, based on their achievement. The term tracking historically referred to the practice of grouping students on the high school level by their ability into different courses with differentiated curriculum and instruction. Tracking differs from ability grouping in that ability groups are informal, short-term and associated with a flexible grouping instructional practice as opposed to something that is long-term and institutionalized. (2002)

An ongoing debate exists about the impact various grouping strategies have on student achievement. Many schools have shifted to ability grouping, despite several critical research findings (Balanced View, 2002). In ability grouping, students are able to enroll in a range of courses from high-, middle-, or low-level classes. These classes are labeled as honors, college-preparatory, general, or vocational. The students who are grouped in these classes rarely move from one level to another.

Proponents of ability grouping suggest that the practice increases student achievement by allowing teachers to tailor the curriculum to match student needs. Teachers often have the opportunity to provide more reinforcement and repetition to low-achieving students. Opponents of ability grouping suggest the practice not only fails to benefit students at any level, but in fact channels poor and racial minority students to low tracks where they receive a lower quality of instruction than other groups. They postulate that this is a contributing factor to a widening of the achievement gap. While some would argue that ability grouping differs from tracking in that it allows for free movement across tracks, current research suggests otherwise. Although students are not as limited in movement, research shows that today's course structures are often stratified in ways that mask the continued existence of high-level and low-level courses.

## **Statement of the Problem**

With the growing need for subgroups in school populations to improve academic achievement as measured by standardized state assessments, schools need to question current practices. Study results examining the quality of instruction in ability groups confirm what critics of ability grouping argue. The instruction presented in high-level classes differs greatly compared to the instruction presented in low-level classes. The federal NCLB mandate demanded that states create “world-class” standards, test student mastery, and hold educators accountable in an attempt to pressure educators to better prepare underserved groups of students. Unfortunately, the seemingly benevolent law with its many penalties prompted states to lower their expectations of students rather than have large groups of their schools branded as failures (*Education Week*, 2013).

Opponents of ability grouping contend that the quality of instruction offered to high-level classes is better than that offered to low-level classes. Kathleen Cotton (1989) inferred students perceived as low in ability are treated differently. Students with low achievement levels have fewer learning opportunities. They experience a lag in learning new material, experience lower level questioning techniques, and are often passed over during questioning periods. Conferencing time or informative feedback is generally brief. There is a lack of praise for success, and students experience a shorter response time compared to those students considered high in ability (1989). Upon the implementation of NCLB, public schools had to reevaluate the necessary steps to ensure every student’s success in school. As a result, public schools had to implement strategies they deemed necessary to achieve AYP in order to avoid government intervention. Public schools

inherited the burden and responsibility to improve student achievement and reduce the discrepancy between high- and low-achieving students.

The same pressure is mounting against the CCSS in the wake of discouraging results on new tests based on the standards. With the implementation and rigor that came with the new CCSS, educators are concerned about the students who were tracked in lower level classes. According to Ravitch (2013), the common core expectations are “way too high”. This was stated after New York education officials announced that more than two-thirds of the state’s students had failed common-core linked tests. Educators are concerned that the new CCSS will cause all students to fall behind and will widen the achievement gap of those students who are tracked in low-level classes even more.

Standards-driven goals have discouraged the use of heterogeneous instructional patterns in favor of ability grouping, which is thought to simplify teaching for standardized test success. The practice of tracking is still present in most secondary schools, even though research has shown that homogeneous groups do not provide students with the highest quality of education. Approximately 80% to 85% of public schools use tracking in some form (Hallinan, 1994) and are ignoring contraindicative research as they continue to employ this practice based on an attempt to increase test scores. One strategy for bringing about change is to provide all students with a quality education stemming from high expectations. Wheelock (1994) recommended pulling away from homogeneous grouping, or the process of organizing students according to their academic ability level, as a strategy to improve student achievement.

A student's ability level is usually based on teacher recommendations and standardized test scores. Teacher perception of students is a critical point where major determinations are made about a student's academic experience in schools.

### **Research Questions**

This study will focus on the following research questions:

1. How do high school core-subject instructors of general education (low-level) track courses perceive academic tracking and the associated achievement gap?
2. What types of expectations do high school core-subject instructors who teach general education (low-level) track courses have regarding general education students?
3. How do high school core-subject instructors who teach general education (low-level) track courses perceive their ability to teach general education students?

Data collected from this study will improve teacher professional development in the area of student motivation, ultimately improving student academic motivation. Results of this study may help administrators, teachers, and those involved in education to understand the extent to which independent variables influence teacher perceptions of tracking and their effect on the existing achievement gap. It will also serve to illustrate the outcomes of teacher expectations on students who are generally tracked in lower level classes and their perceived abilities to teach them.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine teacher perceptions of students enrolled in low-level classes and the academic achievement gap, as well as their expectations of these students. Additionally the study examines teacher ability to instruct students in low-

level classes. The study investigate the influence school tracking has on teacher perception of students who are tracked in lower level classes, teacher perception of student ability, and instructional practices. Investigating the impact of grouping practices on perceptions of effectiveness will allow schools to maximize the potential for student achievement.

By studying the impact of classroom environment and teacher perceptions of student self-efficacy, a greater understanding of the impact of tracking on student academic achievement may develop. In addition, investigating concepts such as self-ability and engagement through specific classroom instructional or curriculum practices may allow teachers to better create and shape student outcomes. This, in turn, may create better opportunities for student achievement.

As educators began to separate students into classes based on perceived ability, they started distancing themselves from teaching for those students in lower level classes. Generally teachers do not volunteer to teach lower level classes, so administrative staff must assign these classes to teachers. Because teachers were assigned to teach these classes rather than electing to do so, they began to resent other teachers who teach upper level classes while also resenting the students placed in low-level classes. This resentment leads to further disparity between high- and low-achieving classes in instructional goals and expectations of students in these classes. These feelings began to trickle down to teacher instructional performances. Their uninspired instructional engagement and design, along with an obvious lack of expectations, becomes evident via the examination of the subpar performances of their students.

## **Research Paradigm**

This study utilizes a qualitative approach to explore and guide the development of teacher perceptions of students who are underperforming in the classroom and on standardized tests. The use of qualitative methodology is necessary to compare and contrast teacher views of students. The study identifies teacher perceptions of learners and their expectations of learners, coupled with how and at what level teachers deliver the lesson. The study assesses whether the teachers feel a desire or need for professional development to assist them in reflecting on and changing their attitude toward low-level achievers. The study data are comprised of interviews, observations, and lesson planning, eliciting teachers' ideas about how to improve motivation and raise expectations in the classroom.

## **Definitions of Key Terms**

For the purposes of this study, the following terms are defined in an attempt to assist the reader in understanding key concepts:

*Ability grouping*: The practice of grouping students with similar abilities into separate classes for the purpose of providing them with instruction targeted to their perceived abilities within a grade level.

*Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)*: An annual measure of student progress utilizing data obtained from state-constructed and mandated testing instruments.

*Common Core State Standards (CCSS)*: Educational standards that help teachers ensure their students have the skills and knowledge they need to be successful by providing clear goals for student learning.

*De-tracking:* The process of eliminating rigid student grouping based on perceived academic abilities and predicted future accomplishments. De-tracking schools group students with different abilities, learning styles, and backgrounds in the same classes—with appropriate support—guarantees all students access to the same knowledge and opportunities.

*Differentiated instruction:* An instructional design model that emphasizes the importance of simultaneously recognizing and addressing the diverse learning needs and abilities of all learners in a single classroom setting.

*End of Course Examination:* A standardized state test that is given to all South Carolina high school students enrolled in English 1 and Algebra 1.

*Heterogeneous grouping:* A method of grouping students with varying abilities, learning styles, backgrounds, and racial and ethnic origins together with an emphasis on challenging curriculum and instruction for all students.

*High-achieving students:* Students placed in the highest academic track or strand available based on perceived or tested ability levels.

*Homogeneous grouping:* The practice of grouping of students in the same classes and work groups according to perceived abilities or performance levels.

*HSAP:* High School Assessment Program. A test administered to all second-year students in high school in South Carolina.

*Low-achieving students:* Students traditionally placed in the lowest academic track or strand based on perceived ability levels.



*Measures of Academic Progress (MAP):* A computer adaptive test used to measure students' progress.

*No Child Left Behind (NCLB):* “While NCLB has certain provisions that apply only to Title I schools, the law clearly requires all states to develop a single system of accountability so there will be uniform standards for all children. Each state is required to develop student-testing programs and demonstrate satisfactory student improvement each year. States are also required to pay particular attention to the progress of children from [ethnic or racial] minority groups and children with disabilities.”

*Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (PASS)* - Test items measure student performance on the South Carolina Academic Standards. PASS test results are used for school, district, and federal (NCLB) accountability purposes.

*Self-efficacy:* Self-efficacy is the belief held by a person that he or she has the capability to achieve his or her goals and is able to produce desired outcomes of performance, as well as having influence over the outcomes in his or her life (Bandura, 1994).

*Teachers:* For the purposes of this study, this group is composed of teachers who instruct students historically identified as low achievers in English and mathematics in one high school.

*Teacher perception:* This is the view teachers have of their students, who are identified as low achievers. Teacher perception of their students will be measured by a constructed survey known as Teacher Sense of Self-Efficacy.

*Teacher expectation:* The belief that students will achieve or underperform in a classroom setting.

*Teacher Professional Development (TPD):* This term is used to describe a variety of training programs designed to continue training and the acquisition of knowledge throughout a professional teaching career.

*Tracking:* The practice of grouping students based on perceived ability level into a set strand (track) of courses, usually referred to as general/low, technical/middle, and college-bound/upper, without the possibility of movement to courses associated with another track.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

One assumption inherent in this particular study is that students might be academically successful regardless of their classroom environment. This environment includes the curriculum, materials, resources, and/or teacher. Another assumption inherent in this study is the relationship between the social influences with other students in the same classroom setting. Social influences and interactions between peers and between teachers can be very complicated.

The study may have been limited with the focus of one school with two disciplines. The research was limited to English and mathematics teachers. The study may not yield any results that can be generalized to other situations or population.

### **Significance of the Study**

The majority of previously conducted studies have concentrated upon the effects that tracking has on student dispositions in low-level tracked courses. The studies also

targeted how teachers employ a watered-down curriculum for these students. The research does not, however, compare and contrast the perception of teachers in one school. My research compares and contrasts teacher perceptions of the students who are placed in lower tracked classes. The teachers come from one suburban school in South Carolina. The comparison determines whether teacher perceptions are in line with or vastly different with one another.

The findings of this study will produce new knowledge and add to the understanding of how schools may better support student achievement by examining the possible influence of tracking structures on student and teacher perceptions of self-efficacy, teacher planning and instruction, and their expectations of these students. The information presented in this study will provide educators and leaders with a better understanding of how tracking impacts student self-efficacy and engagement.

This study has professional application regarding administrative decisions regarding teacher instructional assignments and student classroom assignment. Students who are grouped according to their perceived ability often have their own notions about their academic ability. The responsibility to dispel these potentially inaccurate notions ultimately falls on the teacher. This study will help educational leaders provide proper professional development and training so that teachers may be more successful in the classroom as they work with perceived low achievers. In addition, general teacher self-efficacy influences teacher ability. It may affect the motivation to believe that all students can learn and that teaching is a powerful tool in reaching and working with difficult or challenged children.

Ultimately, the study has the ability to impact social justice. The theoretical intention of this study is to bring awareness to the perceptions, attitudes, and expectations that teachers have toward their students. The study will assist with professional development of teachers who questionably use their background and cultures to develop and deliver curriculum which in turn either sets limits upon or unleashes possibilities for students.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided the impetus for the study and reviewed the challenges that contribute to the research problem such as CCSS, homogeneous ability grouping, and low teacher expectation. Many intervention strategies have been developed that have attempted to improve student motivation and self-reflection in schools. However, many researchers believe that these attempts should have been focused on transforming schools, classrooms, and teaching practices rather than the students themselves. One of the reasons for low performance from students is linked to teacher expectations of these students and the lack of knowledge about how to motivate low achievers. Schools can assist teachers to accomplish a standardized perception of students by focusing on the use of a rigorous curriculum and ensuring universal accessibility to valuable resources regardless of the method used to organize the instructional setting. Researchers have found that teachers should be trained on how to motivate and have high expectations of all learners. There must be effective professional development so teachers can successfully implement new programs. Teachers must have a strong theoretical understanding of the programs and strategies being implemented.

Chapter 2 of the study explores the relevant literature, which provides background information on previous research studies on both tracking and self-efficacy. This review analyzes previous research to scaffold an understanding of what has been reviewed or discussed concerning tracking, teacher perceptions of students who are tracked into low-level, general education courses, and self-efficacy relations. Chapter 3 provides the research methodology and outlines the framework of the research design used in this single case study. The design framework and process delineated guides the collection, analysis, and preparation of the research data. Chapter 4 presents the results of data collection, analysis, and preparation as outlined in the previous chapter. Finally, Chapter 5 focuses on presenting the response to the research questions posed in Chapter 1, as well as provide implications for practice, recommendations for future research, and general conclusions.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

The purpose of this study is to examine teacher perceptions of students enrolled in low-level classes, the lasting impact and influences of tracking on those students, the instructional practices of faculty in those schools, the academic achievement of those students, and the faculty's academic expectations of these students. As pressure for school leaders to improve student achievement mounts, educational leadership must explore multiple ways to engage and motivate students to learn. By investigating practices such as tracking and self-efficacy, educational leaders can seek out alternative pathways for improving student learning. This literature review provides a foundational background on tracking, teacher self-efficacy, and student achievement. First, research and studies on tracking and its influence on student achievement is the focus of exploration. Second, teacher attitudes and perceptions of students tracked in low-level courses research is the next aspect of focus. Steps to close the achievement gap and increase student performance are the last component of the study's focus. The research was conducted in February 2013 using the ERIC database to find articles and books in print to set the historical stage. An emphasis on studies that explore student perceptions of motivational influences and student achievement data with regard to placement in tracked classes forms the basis of foundational research studies. In addition, student and teacher self-efficacy research is summarized.

## **Philosophy of Tracking**

Oakes (1985) conducted a study of 38 schools in various parts of the nation, across different communities and socio-economic classes, focusing on the effects of tracking in schools. Oakes defined tracking as the process whereby students are divided into categories so they may be assigned to groups in various classes. Tracking is an organizational means of sorting students into different levels based upon such criteria as perceived ability, intelligence, or future career paths. Students are publicly identified by being grouped into classes according to their perceived ability level. Historically, tracking was thought to be the most effective and efficient means of working with or managing students. The fundamental nature of tracking is to create homogeneous groupings of students.

## **Implementation of Tracking in Schools**

Tracking was initially implemented in schools to better meet student needs. According to Oakes (1985), a number of educational organizations supported the idea of a differentiated curriculum to prepare students for their perceived future occupations. In a report created by the National Education Association (NEA) in 1918, the idea of high school as a means of preparing children for the future through a differentiated curriculum such as vocational, agricultural, or college preparation was widely supported (Oakes, 1985). The belief at the time was that by differentiating the curriculum and by grouping students homogeneously, teachers would be able to address student needs more efficiently and effectively.

In addition, teachers at the time felt that by separating groups of students into these specialized curricular programs, they were better able to prepare these students for specific careers or success in college programs (Burriss & Garrity, 2008; Oakes, 1985; Oakes & Lipton, 1990). In other words, teachers felt that students should be homogeneously grouped with others at the same perceived ability level so that the delivery of a specific and targeted curriculum could be more expeditiously facilitated. For example, students who were targeted as being able to meet the academic demands of college were given a more rigorous curriculum to better prepare them for the classical languages and academics. Teachers often believed that by placing these students in tracks, there would be more effective grouping and organizational system for schools to operate under (Burriss & Garrity, 2008; Oakes, 1985; Oakes & Lipton, 1990).

There were also widely held beliefs that students would be happier and more comfortable being around others of similar ability levels (Burriss & Garrity, 2008; Oakes, 1985; Oakes & Lipton, 1990). This in turn would create safety and a sense of security for those students who had not previously participated fully in their educational experience. Teachers could more readily focus on advanced students by giving them more challenging and rigorous curriculum, while those students who were not performing well academically could be given the necessary intervention at an appropriate academic level. One hundred years later, tracking is still a popular means for grouping students and for differentiating the curriculum.



### **Reported Benefits of Tracking**

Many educators feel the benefits of tracking include the ability to more effectively teach students of various backgrounds, abilities, and levels of readiness. For example, students who are talented and gifted are often placed on an advanced or accelerated track at a very young age and often remain in the same track until graduation. Teachers who work with gifted and talented students might feel that these students will fail to achieve their fullest potential if placed with students who are not as quick to learn the materials and might slow down their potential growth in a subject or skills area (Oakes, 1985). These teachers also feel students who are more advanced will become bored and disengaged from the learning process unless continuously stimulated or challenged (Oakes, 1985). By having students who are not capable of keeping up with the more advanced students, the teachers are unable to meet the needs of the advanced students. This is based upon the premise that children learn best when they are with other children of the same ability, intelligence, or skill development (Oakes & Lipton, 1990).

### **Adverse Influences and Social Justice of Implementing Tracking**

While proponents suggest that tracking is better for higher ability students so that there are no inhibiting forces at play in these classes, those who criticize tracking do so for a number of reasons. Tracking may be beneficial for academically advanced students, but Oakes (1985) argued that tracking might have negative consequences for students with weaker academic performance or for students who are perceived to have less motivation or capability to learn. Primarily, tracking may be seen as a means of segregating and separating students. One thing that is readily noticed by critics of the

tracking system is the disproportionate number of socioeconomically disadvantaged and racial minority students in lower track levels. Critics of tracking point out that this is simply a de facto means of segregating students along social and racial lines (Rubin & Noguera, 2004). Thus, racial minorities and students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged are placed in tracks that are not often associated with going to college, but instead are focused on vocational trades or simply entering the workforce directly after high school. According to Rubin and Noguera (2004), "... detracking has been embraced as part of a larger effort to promote equity in academic outcomes" (Rubin & Noguera, 2004, p.93). According to Bellanca and Swartz (1993), tracking is a systematic, value-based, and political problem. Tracking as a whole presents as a systematic problem because it is a traditional means of grouping students with the factory model of education which focuses on efficiency as its historical basis. Bellanca and Swartz (1993) proposed the idea that tracking was a value-based problem because students who are assigned to the lowest tracks are often locked into a rigid sequence of courses that lead to lower expectations. Tracking is a political problem because there is a disproportionate representation of disadvantaged students, racial minority students, and non-English speaking students in lower tracks, which also supports the idea that it is easier to manage content, classroom discipline, and skill development when students are with other students of like abilities or skill levels (Oakes, 1985). Hallinan (1994) reported "the quantity and quality of instruction increases with the level of track. The curriculum and instruction were more interesting and engaging in higher tracks" (p.80).

According to Hallinan (1991), “race is associated with test scores, which are usually equated with academic ability. Because Black students generally attain lower average test scores than White students, racial composition is expected to have an indirect effect on track structure through its relationship to student ability” (p.253). Furthermore, Ansalone (2001) proposed that the system of tracking helps to perpetuate the poverty cycle since students who are often in the lowest tracks are the socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Berlek (2009) refers to this as a form of institutional racism, which is difficult to eradicate because racist practices are often invisible and simply seen as accepted standard operating procedures within institutions. Educators believe that tracking is a natural way of conducting sound pedagogy within schools, and they are likely to continue its practice without realizing it may be racist.

Another criticism against tracking is that the placement of a student in one track or another is often done through highly judgmental, opinionated, or subjective means. For example, while some schools have utilized intelligence tests or standardized achievement tests as a means of placing students in tracks, others might simply place students into a specific track based upon criteria that are neither academic nor ability based. Sometimes, placement in a lower level track might simply be based upon criteria such as behavior in the classroom rather than the student’s academic potential or intelligence. Additionally, students might be placed in specific career-focused tracks simply because it is what someone perceives to be the best career for them based on background, experience, ethnicity, or race. According to Hallinan (1991), “given the implications of a school’s tracking system for student opportunities to learn, school personnel need to be aware of

the consequences of their decisions for students' access to the curriculum and to school resources" (p.273).

### **The Influences of Tracking and Teacher Attitudes and Perceptions**

Oakes (1985), Oakes and Lipton (1990), and Burris and Garrity (2008) proposed that a culture of expectation has arisen to create floating standards for the various track levels with higher, more rigorous curriculum and instruction for the higher level tracked students and the opposite for lower tracked students. In other words, teachers tend to have higher expectations for academic performance and create more rigorous courses for higher tracked students. Teachers' minimal expectations of lower tracked students result in "watered-down" curriculum and instruction. This discrepancy in the level of expectations for lower versus higher tracked students also tends to lead toward correlating social attributes for these levels such as behavioral problems (Burris & Garrity, 2008; Oakes, 1985; Oakes & Lipton, 1990).

While teachers' attitude towards tracking reflect their levels of expectations for student performance, Oakes (1985) cited results of a study in which students were surveyed regarding their own perception and attitudes about being placed in a tracked system. Oakes (1985) discovered that students in lower level courses thought of themselves as not being smart and successful. Oakes (1985) found that the opposite held true for students in higher tracked levels. These students had a strong self-concept and regarded themselves as being smart and successful. These studies reveal that tracking may have harmful or deleterious effects on student achievement and self-efficacy.

According to Atkins and Ellsesser (2003), teacher attitudes and perspectives toward tracking differ greatly. In an online survey, responses varied from teachers who believed that tracking provided a clear and focused level of instruction while others viewed tracking as archaic and as a system of suppressing racial minority students. In addition, teachers expressed that maintaining high levels of expectation and rigor in all classes was a more important issue than tracking.

Finley (1984) conducted research on teacher perceptions of tracking at a large suburban high school that served a diverse student population. At this high school there were four tracks for gifted, advanced, average, and remedial courses. The determination of tracking was based upon previous academic work, a department-created achievement test, and teacher recommendation. According to Finley's research, teachers had a more positive attitude toward higher tracked students and their abilities and a negative attitude toward to lower tracked students. Teachers were more enthusiastic about teaching higher tracked students; they felt that it was more rewarding. In addition, teachers generally viewed higher tracked students as more intelligent, motivated, and disciplined. On the other hand, teachers viewed teaching lower tracked classes as frustrating, less rewarding, and presenting more discipline issues. These attitudes were also reflected in the rigor, or lack of rigor, in the curriculum content and expectations. Teachers viewed high-level courses as having a curriculum focused on college achievement and lower tracked courses as decidedly less academic in nature (Finley, 1984).

Van Houtte (2006) completed an analysis of 711 teachers and 3,760 students at 34 Belgium secondary schools. Results of the study indicated there was a relationship

between teacher satisfaction and tracks, or levels of courses they taught. This analysis found that teachers in vocational and technical tracks were slightly less satisfied with their jobs than teachers in general education tracks or schools. One of the primary reasons for the level of teacher satisfaction was teacher perception of student attitudes toward studying and academics. Van Houtte (2006) proposed that teacher job satisfaction is influenced by the amount of trust or distrust they have in the ability of their students to meet expectations. In higher tracked schools, this research also noted that teachers had a higher amount of trust that students would meet their academic and social expectations. Conversely, there was a lower amount of trust exhibited by teachers in vocational or technical schools.

In a separate study on the influence of tracking and school culture, Van Houtte (2004) explored the idea that “teachers’ instructional practice is considered as a surface manifestation of staff culture, and then staff culture is linked to tracking, on the one hand, and to the individual pupil’s achievement on the other hand” (p. 373). This study found that “it is demonstrated that the occurrence of failure is determined by school type: the chance of failing is higher in technical-vocational schools than in general schools” (p. 380). In addition, school culture was dependent upon the type of school—higher academic general schools or lower vocational-technical schools—and teacher expectations for student performance. Teacher attitudes can greatly influence student outcomes (Van Houtte, 2006).

## **Self -Efficacy**

While tracking issues deal mostly with the organizational, academic, and social structure of school's grouping and curriculum patterns, the need to understand the impact of tracking on teacher perception or psychological influences will add to the overall comprehension of how successful grouping practices are with improving student achievement. Self-efficacy is a concept rooted in social cognitive theory that focuses on understanding what motivates people to want to achieve. Albert Bandura (1994) described perceived self-efficacy as the beliefs that people have about their ability to produce levels of performance or to achieve specific outcomes. Perceived self-efficacy also relates not only to a person's belief about his or her abilities in performance, but also to his or her ability to mitigate or overcome other events that might affect his or her life (Bandura, 1994).

Self-efficacy beliefs influence how a person is motivated, how he or she feels about events in his or her life, and how he or she behaves (Bandura, 1994). According to Bandura (1994) positive self-efficacy is associated with higher levels of performance, with the attainment of goals, and with a sense of well-being. In addition, it was proposed that "such an efficacious outlook fosters intrinsic interest and deep engrossment in activities. [People] set ... challenging goals and maintain strong commitment to them."

Teacher self-efficacy is a concept that focuses on a teacher's level of self-confidence in achieving instructional goals. This concept is seen as a critical understanding for educational leaders in promoting improved student performance as well as maintaining teacher retention and performance (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy,

1998). Protheroe (2008) described teachers who have a strong sense of self-efficacy as having greater abilities and efforts related to lesson planning and preparation and execution of instructional strategies. This study also defined two different types of teacher self-efficacy: personal teacher efficacy and general teacher efficacy. Personal teacher self-efficacy refers to the belief that a teacher has in his or her ability to successfully teach students and in his or her instructional expertise (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998; Protheroe, 2008). On the other hand, general teacher self-efficacy refers to a teacher's overall general belief about how powerful teaching can be in reaching students of various ability levels or backgrounds (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998; Protheroe, 2008).

In 1968, Rosenthal and Jacobson completed a study in which elementary school teachers received false information about the ability level of their students. They were provided a list of students who, based on their test scores, were predicted to blossom academically. The names of the list were randomly selected but the teachers were not aware of this. After assessing these students at the end of the school year, the students on the list did indeed blossom compared with those not on the list. There was a more positive effect on Latino and Black children than on White children (Brook, 2002; Schunk, 1992).

Hardre and Sullivan (2009) found that along with high school teachers' perceptions of teacher efficacy, teacher belief and perception of student motivational needs influenced the selection and use of instructional strategies. Ninety-six teachers in 15 high schools were surveyed with a questionnaire that focused on student motivation,



causes for student motivation or a lack thereof, and teacher feelings of efficacy and effectiveness for motivating and teaching students to learn (Hardre & Sullivan, 2009). Results of the study confirmed that teacher levels of efficacy strongly predicted the supportiveness of their classroom environment and the use of internally focused strategies.

Teachers can also play a strong role in a student's development of self-efficacy. Bandura (1994) noted that teachers who have a strong sense of self-efficacy about their teaching skills and capabilities to work with students feel more able to motivate students and contribute to their cognitive development (Bandura, 1994). On the other hand, teachers with a weak sense of self-efficacy tend to "favor a custodial orientation that relies heavily on negative sanctions to get students to study" (Bandura, 1994). The school's social system and culture might also impact teacher feelings of self-efficacy.

### **Teacher Efficacy and Student Performance**

Brophy and Good (1974) conducted a study that provided a comprehensive model of how teacher expectations could influence children's achievement. The model posits that teacher expectations indirectly affect student achievement. Teachers form expectations for students early in the academic year. Based on these expectations, they behave differently toward different students; Students who accept the teacher's expectations will be more likely to act in ways that confirm the teacher's initial expectations. This process will ultimately affect student achievement so that a teacher's initial expectations are confirmed (Schunk, et. al).

According to Bandura (1994) schools have strong potential to shape a student's self-efficacy belief system. This self-efficacy belief system is influenced by the school's culture of academic and social expectations conveyed upon the children through a collective sense of student ability to academically achieve (Bandura, 1994). Therefore, "schools in which staff members collectively judge themselves capable of promoting academic success imbue their schools with a positive atmosphere for development that promotes academic attainments regardless of whether they serve predominantly advantaged or disadvantaged students" (Bandura, 1994).

Furthermore, when teachers use effective forms of feedback as part of daily instructional practice, student feelings of self-efficacy can be heightened (Schunk & Pajares, 2001). They suggested:

Feedback is a persuasive source of self-efficacy information. Performance feedback informs learners of goal progress, strengthens self-efficacy, and sustains motivation. Attributional feedback links outcomes with one or more attributions (perceived causes). In the early stages of learning, effort feedback is highly credible to students (e.g., "You got it right because you worked hard."). As skills improve, switching to ability feedback (e.g., "You are good at this.") may be more credible and have stronger influence on self-efficacy. (p.16)

Schunk and Pajares (2001) noted that other factors in schools weaken self-efficacy. These include the use of norm-referenced assessments, lack of teacher attention, and the challenges and stresses associated with transitional phases of growth and development. In addition, Bandura (1994) stated that classroom environment plays a key role in the development of intellectual self-efficacy. Specifically, the use of differentiated instruction based on individual needs rather than whole group instruction was cited as beneficial. Bandura (1994) pointed out that when students placed in lower ability groups

compared themselves with groups who studied the same curriculum and used the same materials, and when teachers or adults make frequent comparisons between students, these students ranked themselves at a very low level of capability. Consequently, these students established reputations associated with a lack of academic success (Bandura, 1994). On the other hand, when classroom environments recognized uniqueness and differences and when there was individualized instruction that was "... tailored to students' knowledge and skills," students were able to build on their competencies and were not subject to "demoralizing social comparison" (Bandura, 1994).

Teacher self-efficacy beliefs center on the perception that each teacher has the ability and skill to influence student motivation, willingness to learn, and ability to achieve learning goals (Hoy & Davis, 2006). In other words, teacher self-efficacy is the teacher's belief in being able to "organize and execute the courses of action required to successfully accomplish a specific teaching task in a particular context" (p.#, 2006). The conceptual framework behind teacher self-efficacy is derived from social cognitive theories that propose that individual perspectives and attitudes influence the teacher's effort and ability to accomplish educational goals and outcomes with students (Hoy & Davis, 2006). In addition, influences on teacher self-efficacy are based upon the cognitive interpretation that the teacher has about the analysis of the teaching task and its context and the analysis of teacher competency to achieve the task, as well as the four basic self-efficacy principles of mastery experiences, psychological arousal, vicarious experiences, and verbal persuasion (Hoy & Davis, 2006).

Moreover, teacher self-efficacy is also content specific. Teachers may feel more effective in teaching content about which they are more knowledgeable, more skillful, or more experienced. Also, teachers may have stronger feelings of self-efficacy with specific groups of students. For example, a teacher may have more feelings of self-efficacy and the ability to be successful with Honors or Advanced Placement (AP) students than remedial or special education students (Hoy & Davis, 2006). In addition, teacher self-efficacy influences the types of instructional methods used in the classroom. Teachers with a higher sense of self-efficacy tend to use more inquiry-based methods of instruction, whereas teachers with a lower sense of self-efficacy tend to avoid hands-on learning and problem-solving learning experiences (Hoy & Davis, 2006).

The majority of previously conducted studies have concentrated upon the effects of teacher perceptions on individual students who are grouped according to their ability. The research is limited on how teachers perceive the students in low-level classes as individuals. This research targets teacher expectations of their classes as a collective group as well as teacher perception and ability to teach students who are in tracked in low-level class as CCSS is implemented. It will also compare and contrast teacher expectations of these students. The comparison will determine whether teacher perceptions are the same as or vastly different from other mathematics and English teachers.

### **Closing the Achievement Gap and Tracking**

The achievement gap has long been of great interest to many in education. The relationship between the organizational and systemic practice of tracking has been under

debate due to the belief that tracking may exacerbate the achievement gap experienced by racial minorities, economically underprivileged students, and special education students (Burriss & Garrity, 2008; Oakes, 1985; Oakes & Lipton, 1990).

A key element in the effort to eliminate tracking is for educators to establish and maintain high expectations for all students (Petrilli, 2011). It is more challenging to teach mixed ability classes, and it requires more creativity and planning on the part of the teachers. In his book, *Black Students, Middle Class Teacher*, Kunjufu (2002) stated, “I believe that the most important factor impacting the academic achievement of African-American children is not the race or gender of the teacher, but the teacher’s expectations. Teachers often get away with having low expectations and standards for low tracked classes” (p. 47). Boaler (2006) stated, “Students knew the expectations of the students, and the students were able to rise to the teacher’s expectations” (p. 43). Berlak reiterated, “The explanation Claude Steeler offers is that [B]lack students know they are especially likely to be seen as having limited ability. It is a serious intimidation, implying as it does that if they should perform badly, they may not belong in walks of life where their tested abilities are important” (p. 66). He called this phenomenon “stereotype vulnerability.”

Portes (2008) conducted a longitudinal study of the NAEP. In his study, Portes (2008) proposed that despite key efforts to close the achievement gap through federal and private programs, these programs have had very little impact in closing the gap and bringing up a substantial and significant number of subgroup populations’ achievement scores.

Portes (2008) suggested that despite recent political attempts to lessen the achievement gap, there still persists an academic achievement gap between racial and ethnic subgroup populations. This research argued that such “single shot” reforms like charter schools that fail to address a wider socioeconomic problem will probably fail. More research needs to be completed in order to develop more encompassing socioeconomic and academic reforms to truly redress the achievement gap issue. The analysis of NAEP data over a period of several years highlighted when key reforms were introduced which supported this idea. Furthermore, Portes (2008) investigated additional data from intelligence test scores and the impact of social policy on those scores. As the demands for closing the achievement gap continue unabated, reviewing educational practices such as tracking becomes an important area of discussion and debate.

New findings based on more than 20 years of research suggest that despite decades of controversy, teachers do not perceive a problem with placing students into “ability groups” (Toppo, 2013). This study expounds upon how ability grouping affects student academic growth and explores possible measures to close the achievement gap. The research focuses on the seemingly ingrained aspect of the perceived positives of tracking. In addition, it also focuses on teacher perceptions of students who are tracked in lower level classes. There are teachers, schools, and districts that still cling to an outdated system of educational practice in the face of increasing numbers of studies that seem to contradict or at least minimize the need for tracking. While disconcerting, it is an area of study that must be examined and explored in anticipation of the backlash and

dismissal of any educator seeking to undo the practice of tracking. Research must take the lead in dismantling the historical base from which these notions and maxims begun.

### **Summary**

The mandates of NCLB and the new CCSS have brought renewed and vigorous attention to the problems of an academic achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their counterparts. By demanding that focused attention be paid to subgroup populations, NCLB, as well as CCSS, has also forced schools to analyze and investigate action to close this achievement gap. While there are many programs that have been suggested as ways to decrease the achievement gap, one answer may lie in de-tracking.

Arguments and research for the efficacy of ability grouping yield conflicting data. While there have been great strides to research and document what grouping practice works most effectively for student achievement gains, there are gaps in the overall body of research and the ability to consistently replicate the findings of previous studies. Loveless (1999) stated “the wisdom of tracking reform is an open question” (p.31). Archbald and Keleher (2008) suggested there needs to be better control and management of data-driven decision making for schools as they analyze the results and effects of tracking. Only when schools are better able to utilize appropriate and disaggregated data will teachers be better informed as to whether or not they should pursue or discontinuing tracking practices (Archbald & Keleher, 2008).

Arguments have been made against the idea of de-tracking and organizing students into heterogeneous groups. One group against de-tracking argues in favor of homogeneous ability groupings for gifted and talented students. Advocates of gifted and

talented education propose that there is a need for ability grouping, especially in order to meet the needs of students who are gifted and talented (Fiedler & Lange, 1993; Kaplan, 2007; Tieso, 2003).

Proponents of de-tracking cite that tracking influences how student perceive themselves and what future expectations they have for themselves. As a result, those students in lower tracks often have minimal expectations for future success (Oakes, 1985). In addition, proponents of de-tracking point out that there is little evidence to suggest that ability grouping has a positive effect on the achievement subgroup populations. In fact, proponents of de-tracking argue that ability grouping is a cause of widening achievement gap (Burris & Garrity, 2008; Oakes, 1985; Oakes & Lipton, 1990). According to Rubin and Noguera (2006), "... tracking serves to perpetuate and reinforce educational inequities along race and class lines." Therefore, many proponents of de-tracking suggest that one of the ways to close the achievement gap is to de-track schools.

In addition to the influence of tracking, the perceptions of teachers play an important role in student achievement. The social cognitive perception of self-efficacy and student engagement has been found to be influential on feelings of effectiveness and levels of motivation. Since teacher efficacy is related to effective instructional practices, the importance of educational leaders in better understanding what impacts teacher efficacy could be an important facet of exploring ways to improve student achievement and motivation. Teachers who have a stronger sense of efficacy tend to have greater skills associated with planning, preparation, instructional practice, and experimenting with new



strategies (Protheroe, 2008). In addition, those who have shown a stronger sense of efficacy tend to be less critical of student errors. These teachers have viewpoint that all students can achieve despite challenges (Protheroe, 2008).

By investigating the classroom environment associated with teacher and student perceptions of self-efficacy and engagement, a richer understanding of the method by which students are grouped may add to the overall understanding of how best to work with students, give students an optimal environment for learning, and close the achievement gap. This research will also give credence and support to those teachers, schools, and districts that seek to find more effective and less isolating ways to close the achievement gap and ensure that all students are given fair and equal access to the best educational experiences.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

Since the reauthorization of ESEA known as NCLB and the implementation of CCSS, there has been an increased amount of attention paid to closing the achievement gap between those students who continually perform well on state standardized assessments and those who do not. One way that many educational reformists believe the achievement gap can be reduced is minimizing the number of ability groupings for students (Burriss & Welner, 2005; Oakes, 1985). More research is needed to explore how student and teacher self-efficacy are influenced when these homogenous ability groups are used in schools. The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine teacher perceptions of students enrolled in low-level classes, as well as to examine their expectations of these students.

As stated in Chapter 1, this research study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do high school core-subject instructors of general education (low-level) track courses perceive academic tracking and the associated achievement gap?
2. What types of expectations do high school core-subject instructors who teach general education (low-level) track courses have regarding general education students?
3. How do high school core-subject instructors who teach general education (low-level) track courses perceive their ability to teach general education students?

Several sources of evidence were used to collect data in order to answer the research questions. Documentation and archival records of student data and assessment

scores, state and district records of student achievement, and demographic information were collected and analyzed to determine the influence of tracking on student course enrollment and achievement. Interviews, observations, and teachers' assessments were used to triangulate teacher perceptions related to the self-efficacy of teachers.

### **Research Design and Approach**

This qualitative study collected data with the purpose of associating the subjectivity, personal observations and reflections, and the understanding of human behaviors as collected from the participants with the related study research questions. The selection of inquiry method was dependent on the experience of the researcher as well as on the research question itself (Creswell, 2009).

For the purpose of this single case study, qualitative research was used to explore the link between teacher perception of students who are historically identified as low achievers and the impact of teacher perceptions on lesson planning and expectations of these students. Qualitative methodological techniques, specifically the case study approach, were used to examine the circumscribed system of high school tracking and its resulting implications (Merriam, 1998). The research method offered the ability to collect data of breadth and depth that more effectively answered questions examining the perceptions and beliefs of the participants. The case study method encapsulates “a phenomenon of some sort occurring in bounded context” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 25). This method helped to uncover underlying motivations and factors that influence the participants' daily decision making. As Merriam (1998) explained, “The key concern

is understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspective, not the researcher's." (p. 52).

For the purpose of this research study, the single case study approach was used to attain a greater depth of understanding on tracking at one school building using multiple points of information and evidence for triangulation. High school core subject English and mathematics teachers were observed and interviewed to gain information about their perception of these students, their ability level to teach these students, and their level of expectations for these students.

By focusing on one school and analyzing the phenomenon of tracking with different items, this research study mimicked what an educational leader would experience when he or she performs self-analysis of his or her own building and organization. This reflective approach provides practitioners in the field an example of how to conduct internal audits of their own systems' processes or organizational structures and the possible influence of these structures on student performance. Thus educational leaders can focus on analyzing multiple facets of a phenomenon to arrive at more effective solutions for these problems. In addition, the focus of qualitative research adds a deeper perspective of how participants respond to broader tracking and their level of expectations of students who are tracked in low-level classes. It examines how participants feel or think about this phenomenon.

### **Setting and Sample**

The research was conducted at one school in order to gain a greater understanding of certain phenomenon within these settings. The ability to go into great depth is an inherent

strength of the case study approach. The population for this study consisted of high school teachers within a single school from a school district located in the southeast part of the United States. The school is part of a district that serves over 25,000 students in suburban and rural areas. The high school under investigation enrolls approximately 1,600 students with a racial composition of 48% African American, 46% Caucasian, 3% Latino, 1% Asian, and 2% other. There are 33% of the students who are eligible for free or reduced lunch. There are 94 teachers at the school, and 35 of those are National Board Certified.

A convenience sample was used in this study. A convenience sample is a non-probability sampling technique that is commonly used because of the accessibility of the audience or sample to the researcher (Castillo, 2009). The researcher used a convenience sample in this study because of accessibility and to honor the limited nature of the single case study focusing only on one school building and not on a larger group. In addition, the researcher used a convenience sample because of the need to limit the teacher and student group to two content or subject area. The study's findings may have transferability to other cases with demographics similar to the case under investigation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

For this particular study, the selected participants were four teachers who taught students who have been tracked into lower level classes. The teachers instructed students tracked to take Algebra I Part 1, Algebra I Part 2, Geometry Regular, Probability and Statistic Regular, along with Freshman English and its supplementary Remedial Reading course. The participants in the research were two Algebra I, Part 2 teachers and two

Freshmen English teachers. The teachers were either assigned to teach these classes or they requested to teach these classes. The teachers' course assignments ranged from regular-level classes to honors classes. They either taught all low-level classes, college prep classes, or a combination of lower level, college prep, or honors classes.

Students who are tracked in English 1 CP classes consist of rising freshmen who attain a score of less than 227 during the fall assessment of MAP testing and a score of 230 or less during the spring assessment. Even though the English 1 class is heterogeneously grouped, the students who have been identified as low achievers are placed in a reading class during their freshmen year of high school. The English I reading teachers use this extra class time to supplement the reading skills of students who read at or below grade level. They focus on the comprehension skills of inference, identifying details, predicting, summarizing, clarifying, and evaluating. The placement of these students also relies heavily on teacher recommendations. These students typically remain on this lower level track until graduation. Students who are tracked in lower level mathematics classes consist of rising freshmen and sophomores who score below basic on PASS and below the 50th percentile on their fall MAP assessment.

### **Instrumentation and Materials**

Interview questions and classroom observations were utilized to gather the qualitative data in this single method case study. In addition, teacher lesson plans were used to triangulate the interview and observation data. The total data collection served as a means to triangulate data and increase the credibility of the research findings.

The researcher used a semi-structured interview guide of questions. Semi-structured interview questions are more open ended and less directed to allow the participant to more accurately express the perceptions of the event under investigation (Merriam, 1998). Because a semi-structured interview format was used, this guide served as an outline to assure consistent topic inquiry from participant to participant. By nature of the qualitative interview process, participant responses led to further spontaneous questions of inquiry or clarification that were not specified on the guide. The questions were designed to investigate teacher attitudes on tracking, the achievement gap, expectations of students who are tracked in low level courses, and teacher perception of their ability to teach these students. The questions provided a check on what the participants think, as well as an opportunity for yet more information, opinions, and feelings to be revealed (Merriam, 1998). A recording device was used to capture the entire interview narrative. The recordings were transcribed and a verbatim transcript was produced for coding and analysis.

The interview protocol questions were developed based upon the Teacher Self Efficacy Survey (TSES). The protocol was pilot tested with a secondary core subject teacher. The following questions were used to conduct the interview:

1. How do you perceive academic tracking?
2. Do you feel tracking bridges or widens the academic achievement gap? (How?)
3. Do students who are tracked in low-level classes achieve in your class or do they maintain the status quo?
4. Do you believe tracking of students is necessary? Why or Why not?

5. How do you perceive the academic ability of students who are tracked in low-level classes?
6. Imagine that you are a slow learner in your classroom—what do you think you would find to be the most difficult?
7. In what ways do children who are low achievers influence your perceptions of yourself as a teacher?
8. What are your expectations of students who are tracked in low-level classes compared to your expectations of student who are tracked in college prep or honors classes?
9. How do you motivate students who are academically challenged?
10. How much do you do to help students to believe that they can do well in school?
11. What do you do to get students to value learning?
12. Do you feel you are a student motivator? (If so, how? If not, why?)
13. Do you feel you are presently able to meet the needs of children who are low achievers in your classroom? (If so, how? If not, why?)
14. Are there any barriers that you can tell me about that would prevent children who are low achievers from being successful in the classroom?

### **Validity and Reliability**

Creswell (2007) contended reliability is accomplished through obtaining detailed field notes, audio recordings, and transcription. These methods were employed in this research study. Each interview was digitally recorded, and the researcher took notes during the interviews and observations. The interviews were sent to a professional



transcriber to transcribe each digitally recorded interview. Upon the return of the transcripts, the researcher compared the transcription with the digital recording for accuracy.

Several steps were taken to ensure credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness during the research process. Careful documentation and coding of data were used in the research study, also known as an audit log. Member checks were utilized in an effort to confirm and verify the authenticity of the participants' experiences. After the transcription of the interviews, they were compiled onto a document organized by the participants' pseudonyms. The documents were e-mailed to the participants for their review. Peer debriefing was utilized to ensure the accuracy of the coding and to confirm that the data are consistent with the findings.

### **Data Collection**

Case study research design utilizes multiple points of evidence in order to build reliability and validity (Yin, 2009). For this single case study, multiple sources of evidence were collected to gain a greater understanding of tracking and how teachers perceive the students who tracked in these classes. The data also served as evidence of teacher expectation. Teacher participants were interviewed for approximately one hour, observed for two class sessions, and then interviewed for a follow-up session for approximately 30 minutes.

In order to better understand how tracking affects student achievement, the researcher collected teachers' lesson plans and compared them with the responses from teacher interviews and observations. The data collected for research questions related to

student course enrollment data and achievement were pulled from archival information related to student demographics, student PASS scores, MAP scores, and teacher recommendations. The researcher was able to access PASS and MAP from the district website using Enrich. Enrich is a database in which student test scores are archived. The researcher obtained permission from the school district to access these records.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher used multiple data sources to analyze the data and understand the phenomenon under investigation. As a case study in the qualitative tradition, the research questions ultimately focused on the cultural and social regularities of everyday life (Merriam, 1998). This method was applied to determine the teacher perceptions of students, their self-efficacy, and their expectations of students tracked in low-level classes. It sought to explore the existence, if any, of possible themes evidencing similarities and differences among the participant narratives and the related documentation regarding teacher perceptions of self-efficacy between course level/track taught in each area of self-efficacy.

### **Protective Measures**

For the purpose of this single case study research, the following ethical considerations were addressed. According to Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), student identification of academic records must be kept confidential. Student information remained private and confidential. In addition, ethical consideration was given during the interviews and observations. All teachers who participated in this

research study were provided informed consent documentation to sign. No personal information was collected from the teachers (See Appendix A).

### **Summary**

For the purposes of this single method research study, the researcher used qualitative data to address the research questions. Using qualitative data in this particular situation added a dimension of understanding to the phenomenon of tracking or ability grouping practices in public high schools. Interview questions, observations, and teacher lesson plans were used to triangulate and add to the credibility and trustworthiness of the research.

This methodology chapter provided the framework of the research design used in this single case study. The design framework and process delineated in this chapter guided the researcher in the collecting, conducting, and processing of research data. In the next chapter, the data collection and analysis of the research design is delineated and organized according to the three research questions, which will be used as a framing device for the structure of the chapter. Specifically, multiple points of data will be collected and analyzed in support of this qualitative method single case study design.

## **Chapter 4: Results and Findings**

The purpose of the study was to investigate teacher perceptions of students enrolled in low-level classes. The study investigated how high school core-subject instructors of general education (low-level) track courses perceive academic tracking and the associated achievement gap, the types of expectations high school core-subject instructors who teach general education (low-level) track courses have regarding general education students, and how high school core-subject instructors who teach general education (low-level) track courses perceive their ability to teach general education students. Participants provided their personal thoughts on academic tracking, their expectations of their students who are tracked, and their perceived ability to teach these students. They responded to interview questions presented by the researcher.

This chapter is divided into five sections. The first section is an overview of the participant demographics characteristics, academic experience, and classes taught. The second section describes themes that emerged from the interviews and includes sample quotes from by the participants and the interviewer. The third section describes notes from the researcher's observation. The fourth section examines a lesson plan from each participant from the lesson that was observed to triangulate the data. Finally, issues of subjectivity, validity, and limitations of the study are discussed.

The following research questions were addressed through collected data and interpretations as follows:

1. How do high school core-subject instructors of general education (low-level) track courses perceive academic tracking and the associated achievement gap?
2. What types of expectations do high school core-subject instructors who teach general education (low-level) track courses have regarding general education students?
3. How do high school core-subject instructors who teach general education (low-level) track courses perceive their ability to teach general education students?

### **Materials**

The researcher used an interview guide of questions. Because a semi-structured interview format was used, this guide served as an outline to assure consistent topic inquiry from participant to participant. By nature of the qualitative interview process, participant responses lead to further spontaneous questions of inquiry or clarification not specified on the guide. An iPad was used to record the entire interview process. In addition, a journal was used to recode data from the observations.

### **Overview of Participants**

Participants interviewed for this study were four teachers; two mathematics and two English teachers. The chart below presents a breakdown of their demographic background:

Table 4.1: Demographic Breakdown of Study Participants

	Gender	Race	Teaching Experience (Years)	Age	Subject/ Course
Participant 1	Male	Black	30+	54	Algebra I, Part 2
Participant 2	Female	White	10	34	Algebra I, Part 2
Participant 3	Female	Black	8	32	English I/Reading
Participant 4	Female	White	21	43	English I/Reading

### Participants Interviews and Profiles

Data collection began in November 2013 with scheduled face-to-face interviews for all participants. The participants were given the interview questions prior to their interview. This gave each participant time to reflect on the questions before the interview. All interviews were completed by January 2014. Participants were coded as Participants 1-4 in this analysis.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant in a private setting. Interviews took place on the school campus at the interviewee's time and place of convenience. Length of the interview varied from teacher to teacher, but on average lasted one to two hours. Prior to the interview, teachers were told that the purpose of the

research was to obtain their views and thoughts on working with children who have been identified as low achievers.

Participant 1 is from South Carolina. He attended Howard University in Washington, DC where he received a bachelor's degree in mathematics. He also received an academic scholarship to attend Howard University. He grew up in a two-parent home, and both of his parents graduated from college. There were three other siblings in the family. Participant 1 expressed that even though he felt he grew up with a humble beginning, he never desired or needed much that his parent could not provide.

Participant 1 is a basketball coach, so the interview took place in the gym where he spends most of his time. Before beginning the interview with the participant, the researcher ensured that the location was conducive to an uninterrupted interview. Participant 1 seemed very relaxed and comfortable as the interview process began. The researcher noticed that he wrote down some responses to some of the question before the interview began, even though he did not actually refer to the paper during the interview. Participant 1 has been teaching mathematics for over 30 years, and it appeared that he still enjoys his career as a teacher. He has been working at the present school for one and a half years. He stated that he felt very fortunate to have this job as a coach and mathematics teacher at his age.

Participant 2 is from South Carolina and grew up in a two-parent home. Both of her parents attended Clemson University, and she continued the tradition as well. She received an academic scholarship to attend Clemson where she majored in mathematics education. Participant 2 had one younger brother who also attended Clemson University.

The researcher scheduled a meeting with Participant 2 in her classroom during her planning period. The atmosphere was conducive for the interview, and the participant expressed her feelings about being interviewed and the opportunity to express her feelings about the interview questions. She stated that she was looking forward to the interview. She had a seat prepared for the researcher, and she also had responses to the interview questions written down. She sat on the edge of her seat as the interview began. Participant 2 has been teaching for 10 years, and she has never taught at any other school but the present school. She enjoyed her job as mathematics teacher, but she felt it was time to make a change to another school due to her commute.

Participant 3 is from South Carolina and attended the University of South Carolina where she received an education degree in English education. She too grew up in a two-parent home with two younger brothers. One parent attended college and worked for the state of South Carolina. The other parent worked in the restaurant business.

The researcher scheduled a meeting with Participant 3 in her classroom during her planning period as well. The researcher and the participant agreed that her school would be a good location to conduct the interview. Sitting in her classroom and observing all of the material used to enhance student learning was very enlightening and moving. The classroom appeared to be very inviting to students. Participant 3 stated that she teaches with dim lights so students felt like they were in a relaxed and comfortable environment. She explained her responsibilities as an English teacher with excitement and enthusiasm.



Participant 4 is from Ohio and grew up on a dairy farm. She is the youngest of six children. Her father moved them to South Carolina when she was nine for better weather and job opportunity. Their diet came directly from the garden that was grown in their backyard. Participant 4 scheduled her interview at the high school where she worked after the students left for the day. Participant 4 revealed that she enjoyed teaching children, but she felt she could never accomplish everything she needs to do to be a successful teacher. The room was decorated with several stations of English books and posters that showed the rules for writing. This made the atmosphere very relaxing and comfortable. She began the interview with a brief background of herself and her college experiences. She explained that she worked her way through college, and her mother was one of nine children who graduated with a high school diploma. She stated that she wanted more out of life than what her mother possessed. After confirming and validating original quotes extracted from the interviews, the researcher utilized 36 of the original quotes from the participants' narratives collected to gauge their perceptions on teaching low achievers. After each quote, the participant code number is presented.

### **Teacher Perception of Tracking**

The first six questions pertained to tracking and the associated achievement gap resulting from and exacerbated by tracking.

Two of the four participants felt that tracking was beneficial to promote learning for low achievers. They felt it was necessary for students who have been identified as low achievers to be with other students who are considered low achievers so the teacher can collectively work on their deficiencies.

I feel like it's been around for a long time from what I can gather, and I feel like it's necessary. It helps put kids that have certain deficiencies together, and I think it gives the teacher a chance to work on those deficiencies. And the students who are maybe the higher achievers can still move at a faster pace if they're in another class. (Participant 1)

I think it's beneficial to the lower level students, particularly because if they're not tracked in the beginning a lot of them get left behind. A lot of times they fall behind in the summers in elementary school, and when they come back they're already behind. I feel like it's a vicious cycle. And when they're in the classes where they're all mixed in, I guess that would be heterogeneously, I feel like they don't strive as much because they lose some self-confidence. (Participant 2)

On the other hand, one of the participants supported tracking if the right conditions were in place. One commented,

I think if you're going to track kids to know where they stand, then we have to give a sincere opportunity to meet kids really where they are, and we have to make it feasible and realistic.

When asked if she could give an example of the right condition, she further explained that as smaller classroom size would qualify. (Participant 3)

Conversely, one participant felt tracking was not necessary and felt it trapped the student.

Tracking is not necessary and it does not benefit students. Academic tracking for students who might not have performed well in elementary or middle school needs to be moved into more advanced classes, but the stigma is there that "oh, we can't change them into a more advanced." So, tracking students traps them, especially at the high school level since they grow and mature and chance so much. (Participant 4)

Two of the participants felt that tracking bridges the achievement gap.

I really think that it bridges the gaps. (Participant 1)

I am a product of tracking, and I like it this way. (Participant 2)

One participant was unsure because she did not know of a situation where tracking had effectively benefitted students.

That's really hard for me to say. I'm not sure that I've ever seen it done effectively or done differently. (Participant 3)

The researcher asked for an example for an effective situation.

Maybe when the stronger kids can truly work with the other kids without lacking on their part, and the kids that are maybe struggling in the same area would have an opportunity to grow. But, I think sometimes, for some reason there is a pressure to hurry up and get certain things done due to standardized testing. Standardized testing is almost a filtering system. (Participant3)

Conversely to the other responses, one participant felt it widens the achievement gap.

It widens the gap. Again, students who do not want to perform are apathetic, and are tracked and trapped into those honors level classes. But yet the students who mature socially and cognitively, they might be trapped in what we call regular level track. (Participant 4)

When asked whether students achieve well when they are tracked in low-level classes or whether they maintain the status quo, three of the participants felt that their students achieve better when they are placed in low-level classes.

The class that I had last year, I probably had about three-fourths of those students that I felt like really mastered the objectives that we had in the Algebra I, Part 2 class, based on the EOC scores. (Participant 1)

A lot of times they achieve well. (Participant 3)

I would say yes because I think when they're with students who are way above them, they lose some self-confidence and they just kind of give up. (Participant 2)

One participant felt that when students who have been identified as low achievers are placed in classes with college prep students, they perform better.

When I use to teach classes that were strictly college prep or strictly regular, in the strictly regular classes, the students really struggled to try to achieve more because they were pulled down by the students who did not want to achieve or did not want to learn. I did not like that. I liked it so much better when I was teaching a college prep class and I just happened to have some students in there, who were struggling a little bit academically, but they rose to the expectations and

have to move at a slower pace. . . . They rose to the peer pressure of being in a class with more motivated students and it caused them to achieve more. (Participant 4)

All four of the participants felt students who have been identified as low achievers can achieve as well as any student in college prep classes.

I think that they can achieve just like any other students. Their academic abilities are just like that of a student who may be a “high achiever”, but they just might . . . I feel that students experience different accomplishments at different stages. A small victory for one can be a huge victory for another student. It is all considered an academic growth. (Participant 3)

I think they are very much mislabeled and people have misinterpreted their abilities, especially in what we want to call those low level classes. There are a lot of males with ADHD who are brilliant, but because of their behavior and because they might not take their medicine, they are tracked into what we would call a low-level class. I have several cases as such in my classroom. (Participant 4)

### **Teacher Expectations of Low Achievers**

Question 8 from the interview protocol was used to capture participant responses about their expectations of their students who are tracked in low-level classes. The question was utilized to determine whether their expectations were the same for those students who they teach in college prep classes as compared to the students they teach in low-level classes. Three of the participants felt their expectations of low-level students were the same as those students who were tracked in low-level classes.

Believe it or not, my expectations are the same. I still expect those kids to pass the EOC. I just know they might not learn at the same rate, but they can still master the same material. (Participant 1)

I feel bad for saying this, but I do not dwell a lot on the numbers of high-level or low-level students. I only glance at them and then I teach my kids. So if my expectation is one thing for this child who is a high-level achiever, I’m expecting the same thing for the child next to him even if they’re levels are below that kid. (Participant 3)

I think I've been conditioned from decades of teaching experience that teachers who so-called teach "regular level classes" shouldn't expect much from them. Now I feel differently. I have the same expectations for all of my students regardless of their level. These same students have been victims of low expectations from other teachers. (Participant 4)

One participant explained that her expectations of her low-level students changes according to their environment.

I would say my expectations in the classroom are the same, but my expectations when they go home are completely different. I don't see them doing homework, so I only give homework once a week, and even then I give them time in class to complete it. (Participant 2)

### **Teacher Perceptions of their Ability to Teach Low Achievers**

Question 7 and Questions 9-14 were utilized to get a greater understanding of how teachers perceive their ability to teach students who have been tracked in low-level classes and those who have been identified as low achievers. The participants expressed their feelings on their ability to motivate and meet the needs of students identified as low achievers.

Three of the participants felt that teaching low achievers afforded them the opportunity to reflect on themselves as a teacher to determine whether the students' needs are being met.

When I teach students that are categorized as that, I try to check myself to make sure that I'm meeting their needs. So, they kind of make me always check and make sure that I am doing all I can do to learn and want to learn. (Participant 1)

They make me look at my heart behind what I do and whether or not I truly have to teach. A low-level kid really needs someone who truly knows how to teach. (Participant 3)

I constantly feel like I do not give these students what they need, because they need so much. They need so much and I wish I could work one-on-one with them

all day long. They've been overlooked for one reason or another, but working with what we call low achievers, they make me feel I can't work hard enough to help them. (Participant 4)

One participant enjoys teaching low achievers, but did not express any self-reflection.

"I enjoy it." (Participant 2)

Three of the four participants felt they were a student motivator for low achievers and they felt they had the skills to help students value learning.

I try to continually tell them that they can achieve. I try to make the environment to where it would be inviting and they don't feel threatened in the environment. I tell them that they can do it just like everyone else and the label on them can't be a roadblock. As far as valuing learning, I try to relate the objectives to real life situations and try to tell them what job might rely on math. (Participant 1)

I make sure to spend my time with them individually on days that we work in class on the whiteboards. Doing this at the beginning of the week will help them by Wednesday or Thursday. I also give positive reinforcement. I give them stickers for working hard. I get them to value learning by talking to them about opportunities after school other than college. Some will go to college, but some will not. The ones who don't think they'll make it, I try to talk to them about jobs just to give them some sort of goal to look forward to. (Participant 2)

I further asked Participant 2 what she tells her students if they said they wanted to go to college and asked whether she discouraged that. She responded by saying, "I don't discourage it, but I might hint at a technical school or a two-year degree."

I have to find out what their passion is. If they don't have one, I have to find a way to help them. I take this information and try to bring it in the classroom. I want them to know that what they are doing can help them achieve their goals. If I feel a student is not valuing learning, we must have a conversation. I am led to do what I need to do from that conversation. (Participant 3)

Participant 4 felt that motivating students was difficult for her.

I struggle with trying to motivate students. I try to keep up with current trends, but it's tough to do because I have to stay on top of pop culture and that has been increasingly difficult with my years of teaching. I am always looking for new things for them to read and write about, that could connect me to them to motivate

them. I get students to value learning by allowing them to see a real purpose to the lesson. It needs to be worthwhile. They can't see it as pointless. Some English teachers try to teach novels from the 1800s, but they need to connect it to a current trend from today. (Participant 4)

Two of the four participants felt capable of meeting the needs of students who were tracked in classes as low achievers. Some stated that they would be even more capable if certain conditions were in place to meet their students' needs.

Well I think I still have enough energy to teach students who have that label, because you're going to have to have some energy. And then I think I have enough patience to work with them and I expect them to succeed. So I think as long as I have those things, I think I will be okay. (Participant 1)

Yes, I do. I think this because I want to and the way I try to plan allows for them to have room to mess up and have another chance as long as communication is open. Whenever I get to a point where I'm just teaching and there's no purpose behind it, that's when I need to stop. (Participant 3)

The other two participants felt that they could meet the needs of the students if they had smaller classes. This would allow them to have more one-on-one time with their students.

I don't think I am capable of meeting the needs of these students, because I don't have enough time to give them one-on-one attention. When you have 20-something students, I feel like the lowest of the low, I can't get them everything they need. I feel we need tracking within tracking. (Participant 2)

I think I meet their needs, but not as much as I could if I were to have smaller class sizes. (Participant 4)

The researcher ended the interview by asking each participant whether they felt there were any barriers that would prevent children who are low achievers from being successful in the classroom. All four of the participants expressed their feelings about barriers that may interfere with low achievers being successful.

"Their home life could be a barrier." (Participant 1)

Organization is a huge thing. I think that is a personal barrier with them. If they are not organized, they will not be able to look back at notes to help them. Other barriers would be reading levels in the math classroom. And then home; the lack of support at home could be a barrier. (Participant 2)

I really just think standardized testing is a barrier. I think as long as we have this test that everybody has to take, and the scores of that test are going to have so much to do with what a child can and cannot do, it just deters a kid from believing that it's worth it. I think it's all about classism and wanting to weed people out. (Participant 3)

Going back to the concept of them being trapped; I think their belief in themselves. They're so egocentric and it's all about them at this age. So, whatever they've been told through the years, whatever they've begun to believe about themselves and their ability over the years, that carries with them. So, a barrier for their success would be what they believe they can do or cannot do. (Participant 4)

### **Observations**

Each participant was observed in a class session to further examine their level of expectations and interaction with students who have been identified as low achievers. An observation time was set up with each participant to ensure an assessment would not be given on the day the observation took place. The school is set up on a schedule of four 90-minute blocks. Each block consists of two 45-minute classes. Students can take 90-minute classes or 45-minute classes. The researcher observed each participant for a total of 90 minutes. Observations notes were documented in a journal. The following chart provides the demographic data for the students of each participant.



Table 4.2: Demographic Data for Participants' Students

	Male	Female	Percentage		Black	White	Percentage		504 Plan	IEP
Participant 1	13	12	52 %	48%	15	10	60%	40 %	0	0
Participant 2	19	6	76 %	24%	17	8	68%	32 %	3	3
Participant 3	11	8	58 %	42%	17	2	89%	11 %	0	4
Participant 4	12	12	50 %	50%	13	11	51%	49 %	0	3

### Participant 1

The environment of the classroom was a computer lab. Due to the fact that Participant 1 is a basketball coach, he only teaches two classes per semester, one of the classes being a Physical Education class scheduled in the gym. With this schedule, he floated into another teacher's classroom. The classroom was set up with computers on the perimeter of the room and four round tables in the center of the classroom. The lab was decorated for a business classroom.

The participant was seated at his desk upon my arrival. My presence was acknowledged with a "Good morning," and he began to take attendance of his students. The students in the classroom were students who took Algebra I, Part 2 the previous year and were not successful with the course. The class also consisted of students who took Algebra I CP and received a grade of D. The mathematics department policy requires that any student who took Algebra 1 CP and received a grade of D must repeat the second part of Algebra 1. The class is called the Algebra I, Part 2 repeaters' class, which is a semester class.

The participant was still learning some of the names of the students due to the fact that the semester began four weeks prior to the observation. The students were sitting very quietly at either a computer or a center table. There were no computers at the center tables, but students did have access to their Chromebooks issued by the school. Students were seated in alphabetical order so it would be easier for the participant to learn the name of each student and, as he stated earlier, to maintain order. A group of boys were seated closer to the front of the classroom near the participant. When I asked the participant about this arrangement, he stated that this group had a tendency to get off task and therefore he found it necessary to move them closer to the academic activity.

The lecture began with the participant asking students to take out their notes so the homework could be discussed. He asked the class, “How many of you turned in your homework?” About two-thirds of the class raised their hands. The participant addressed the fact that students should attempt their homework assignment to be successful in the course. The participant gave a review from the homework on solving equations with variables on one side. He encouraged participation from students by calling on random students to answer questions. Despite the fact that some students did not have their homework assignment, all the students appeared to be engaged in the review of the homework assignment.

The participant transitioned the lecture by introducing solving equations with variables on both sides. He explained how the problem should be worked and gave students the opportunity to practice independently. All students appeared to be on task and the participant walked around to monitor and answer any misunderstood concepts.

He reminded students to check their answers by substituting the results back into the problem. The researcher walked around the classroom to monitor student engagement with the lesson. All students were working the sample problems from the participant. The researcher stopped to ask two students whether they felt it was important to check their answers upon completion of solving an equation. One student responded by saying, “Yes. I want to make sure I am correct with my work.” Another student responded by saying, “I know my work is correct, but Coach Participant 1 said we must check it, so I do.” While walking around the room, the participant approached me and said that the students will work consistently as long as he stands before them to monitor their progress. He explained that if he sits at his desk for over 10 minutes, they can become talkative and will get off task. He stated that he did not mind constant monitoring as long as they are working and learning. He was often seen praising the students for making progress. There were some students who got off task. The participant addressed these students verbally and pleasantly to help them remain focused on the lesson. They immediately began to focus and got back on task. After practicing four problems, the students were given the opportunity to work a new problem without verbal discussion. This was done via blogging to other students within the class. The participant was able to access students’ understanding of the new concept by viewing what students were blogging to each other. Students followed directions and appeared to enjoy blogging about the new concept with their peers.

## **Participant 2**

The environment of the classroom was inviting to a mathematical eye. The walls were decorated with mathematics and inspirational posters. The students were seated in pairs. The participant stated that she paired her student according to the same ability level. She explained that she grouped lower students with lower students and high-level students with higher level students. She stated, “Even though this is already a low-level class, it makes it easier for me to spend more time with the pair who may not have a clue.” She continued by saying that the lower level students sat on the right side and the upper level students sat on the left side. Each chair had a colorful bag that was hanging from the back. The bags consisted of markers, whiteboard, whiteboard erasers, and graph paper. The participant explained that this gave students easy access to supplies needed during class time. The participant’s desk was away from the students and very closed in. The students who were placed in this class were students who were successful in Algebra 1, Part 1 with a grade of at least a D.

The participant began the lesson by telling students that they were welcome to use their notes from the previous day. She also explained that if they had received a zero on the take-home quiz, they should not turn it in. All students had their whiteboard, markers, and erasers already placed on the desk before the tardy bell rang. The researcher asked a student why the whiteboards were out on desks. He explained that it was Wednesday and students practice problems on Wednesday.

The participant began the lesson by giving a problem using systems of equation. Students began to work the problem as the participant walked around to monitor their progress. Upon completion of the problems, the students held their whiteboards up so the

participant could check their work. If the student did not have the correct answer, the participant walked around to assist. Students also collaborated with their partner to check their work.

As the participant walked around, she held her right hand on her forearm. She often knelt down to answer questions from the students. Praise was given for progress. There were two students who sat in the back of the classroom on the right side who were struggling with the concept. They raised their hands, but for some reason they were not acknowledged by the participant. They put their hands down and asked another group about the misunderstood concept. When a question was asked to the participant, she did respond to the students by allowing them to think through the answers. Students appeared engaged in the lesson. The researcher heard two comments from two students who appeared to enjoy the participant's class.

Student 1: "If you are not going to be here next year, I am going to fail math."

Student 2: "Can you stay until I graduated?"

The participant smiled at the comments. The comments came from the left side of the classroom where the upper level students reside.

At one point a student yelled out and said, "John snatched something from me." The participant responded by saying, "I am not a babysitter." She continued with the lesson. It appeared that the student withdrew from the lesson in response to that comment. The lesson ended with one problem where students had to recall information from a previously taught concept.

### **Participant 3**

The environment of the classroom was very inviting upon entering. The classroom was decorated with large posters. Some posters were English related while others were inspirational. There was also a bookcase full of books, and a section of the room was dedicated for reading. This section had lounge chairs. The atmosphere was very calm and relaxing. The lights were dimmed and soft music was playing as students entered the room. I later found out that the music was from the Odyssey, which was the focus topic of the lesson. The class was divided into three groups of seven.

The participant instructed students to take out their homework. She gave the students the opportunity to complete their homework in case it was not completed. She continued to update students on the time. After the allotted time was completed, the participant began to walk around to check students' homework. Over half the class did not have their homework. Everyone who was seated at the first table had their homework completed. Three of the seven students seated at the middle table did not have their homework completed or had not attempted it. No students at the last table had their homework completed. The participant addressed the class about their lack of effort concerning their homework. She reminded them that they only had four questions to answer. She also reminded them that they had the entire period the previous day to work on the questions. She said, "Not having it is ridiculous." The class was quieted by this comment. There was no review of the homework assignment.

The participant began the lesson by explaining that they would make connections with informational texts. She called it Give One, Get One. Each group was given an article from *The New York Times* and a chart to complete. Their first task was to read the

article and write down any words they had difficulty in comprehending. They were to take these words and look up the meaning using their Chromebook. The teacher stood at the front of the classroom while the students worked. After about 10 minutes, she walked to me to explain that the students were grouped according to their ability level. The smarter students were in Group 1, the middle-level students were in Group 2, and the low achievers were in Group 3. Group 3 was the same group that did not have their homework. She explained that the reason for grouping them according to their ability level was to allow them to focus on reading that best suited their immediate environment. They would benefit from students who read on their same level.

For the second task, the participant asked students to find an interesting point from the article and record it in the chart. Students were asked to collaborate with their group members and compare what each found to be the most interesting point of the article. Upon completion of each task, the groups rotated to a different table and read a new article. The group members did not change. The closure of the lesson involved an opportunity for students to rotate to a group that had representatives from each article read. In those groups, the students discussed their topics and were able to ask questions and make cross-textual connections with the Odyssey and real world events. The participant discussed the relevance of topics that arose from the Odyssey in conjunction with major historical events referenced in the articles.

#### **Participant 4**

The environment of the classroom was very warm and inviting. The walls were decorated with posters with rules of grammar and inspirational sayings. There were five

large whiteboards that hung from the walls. Each board gave information about the upcoming activities for the week as they related to the classroom. There were several bookcases throughout the classroom. There were also books on the window seat. The students were seated in groups of four. There were six groups in the classroom. Students were arranged in groups according to their reading ability level, which integrated low achievers in mixed-ability grouping.

The students entered the room very quietly and were prepared to work. The participant welcomed them to the class and gave them instructions for the lesson. While giving the instruction, the participant walked around the class. It appeared that this movement throughout the class allowed the students to be interested in what the participant was saying. They also appeared eager to begin the lesson.

The participant's initial instructions were for students to put away all cell phones and headphones. The participant explained that they would watch a short movie clip from *Cast Away*. While students were watching the movie, the participant continued to walk around the classroom making sure the students were paying attention. If they had their head down, she gently touch them on their back. The student would sit up from their position.

Upon the completion of the clip, she questioned the students about the clip. She asked, "Was he on the raft with anyone?" "So for him to build the raft, he had to engineer the materials for the raft himself." The students responded to her questions and comments. She continued by saying, "Because he was alone, he had to build the raft by



himself.” She explained to the students that when you are on a team, you must solicit support from your team. She related this analogy to the novel they were reading.

The students were instructed to analyze passages from the novel *The Lord of the Flies* in which they had to highlight the leadership qualities of the three main characters. After analyzing numerous passages from the novel, they read through an excerpt from a management book. The management book identified different personality types. Students had to match traits from the characters in the novel to the personality types in the management book. Before the participant could complete her instructions, students appear eager and ready to begin the lesson. They worked together while the participant answered any misunderstood concepts. The lesson ended with the participant allowing students to discuss the traits they noted on their charts for the three main characters from the book.

### **Lesson Plans**

Each participant was asked to present a lesson plan on the topic of the lesson the researcher observed. The following is an outline of the lesson plan.

#### **Participant 1**

Participant 1 did not provide a lesson plan for the requested lesson. He felt that after teaching so many years, preparation of lesson plan was not necessary. He stated, “I can teach Algebra 1 with my eyes closed.”

#### **Participant 2**

Participant 2 submitted a hand-written lesson plan on solving systems of equations.

**Essential Question:** What does the number of solutions of a system represent?

How can systems be used to represent situations?

**Objective:** Solving systems of linear equations exactly, approximately graphically, and algebraically.

**Common Core State Standard:** A1, B3, C5

**Instructional Procedure:** Students spent a week learning to solve systems graphically. Students took notes yesterday on solving systems algebraically. Students will work with their partner on a whiteboard demonstrating their knowledge on this topic. Real world application.

**Evaluation/Assessment:** Ongoing throughout the class period.

**Activity:** Student whiteboards, group work, constructive immediate feedback.

### **Participant 3**

Participant 3 submitted a typed lesson plan.

**Bell Ringer:** Check homework

**Common Core State Standard:** Reading Standards for informational Text 4-7; Speaking and listening A-D; 3.

**Instructional Procedure:** Class will be divided into 3 groups. Each group will have one article printed from *The New York Times*. Once all kids are in groups, instructions will be projected on the smartboard. We will be doing the “Give One Get One” engagement where each group will read and dissect its assigned article. Each group will have 15 minutes to dissect their article. Once that time is up, each group will rotate to a different group to complete their Give One Get One chart. They will be given five minutes. When the groups are finished with both rotations, we will reconvene as a class and each group will share various points from their Give One Get One chart. Upon completing this discussion, we will decide on three main conclusions to draw in connection with the Odyssey. Once we have all conclusions down, we will wrap up the discussion.

**Student Product:** At this point the students will have a printed copy of one of three articles in front of them. They will use highlighters or pens to dissect the article.

**Overall Purpose:** As we read the Odyssey by Homer, I want to keep kids engaged and see cross-textual connections that transcend time periods and connect to modern issues in the real world.

### **Participant 4**

**Description of the class:** 24 students; Four receive support lab services; independent reading levels range from 5<sup>th</sup> grade – 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Students are arranged in cooperative groups in class based on ability level and personalities.

**Background for lesson:** This week students have been using close reading to analyze passages from William Golding’s classic novel *The Lord of the Flies* that highlight the leadership qualities of the three main characters. After analyzing numerous passages from the novel, students will read through an excerpt from a management book written from companies that evaluate employees in order to choose the best personalities for leadership position.

**Common Core Standards for Informational Texts Grades 9-10:** Students will cite evidence from the text to support what the students analyze and the inferences they draw from the text. By the end of 9<sup>th</sup> grade, students will read and comprehend literary nonfiction in the Grades 9-10 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

**Objective:** Students will use evidence from a management handbook to assign leadership personality traits to the character of Ralph, Piggy, and Jack based on their knowledge of these characters from the novel.

**Assessment:** Students will: a) complete a chart to document evidence from the management handbook as well as evidence from the novel to support their analysis of each character, and b) write a character analysis paragraph about each character to include evidence from the novel to support their statements about each character.

### **Results of Study**

**Research Questions 1:** How do high school core-subject instructors of general education (low-level) track courses perceive academic tracking and the associated achievement gap?

#### **Tracking Primary Uncontested (Interview)**

**Results:** Participants 1, 2, and 3 felt that tracking was necessary and beneficial for student, and it aids in closing the achievement gap. The same three participants felt that low achievers can perform at the same ability level as college prep and honors students. Participant 4 felt that tracking traps students in a cycle, and it widens the

academic achievement gap. This same outlying participant felt that heterogeneous grouping allows students to flower from the interactions of mixed ability classroom.

#### **Tracking Primary Uncontested (Observation)**

**Results:** Participants 1 and 4 organized their classrooms heterogeneously and Participants 2 and 3 re-tracked their students within the classroom. Participants 2 and 3 cited their ability to better address individual needs as the justification for tracked classrooms. Participants 1 and 2 (mathematics) are sub-tracked at the department level before classroom assignments are made, causing the students in the class of participant 2 to be tracked three times. Participants 3 and 4 (English) are covertly sub-tracked by section number and not courses name at the department level.

#### **Tracking Primary Uncontested (Lesson Plans)**

**Results:** Participants 1 did not submit a lesson plan and justified his lack of preparation by stating he could teach with his eyes closed. Despite the absence of a written lesson plan, the participant demonstrated a sense of organization and appeared to possess and prioritize basic goals and objectives for the class.

Participant 2 submitted a hand-written lesson plan consisting of a bulleted list with a basic goal and objective that lacked connection to the CCSS. The goals and objectives were met at an insufficient level based on interview data. Low-level, classroom-tracked students received less attention.

Participant 3 submitted a typed lesson plan that indicated complex goals and objectives and vague connections to CCSS. Observations negated the intentions of goals

as stated on lesson plan and during interview session. Low-level, classroom-tracked student received less attention than the upper level students.

Participant 4 submitted a typed, highly detailed lesson plan with specific connection to the CCSS. The written goals and objectives required higher order critical thinking skills, and the participant demonstrated a well-organized classroom environment and attentiveness to the entire class.

**Research Question 2:** What types of expectations do high school core-subject instructors who teach general education (low-level) track courses have regarding general education students?

#### **Self-Fulfilling Prophecy (Interview)**

**Results:** All participants suggested that their expectations were the same for low-level, college prep, and honors student respectively. Participants 1, 3, and 4 indicated they did not focus intentionally on student ability as an indicator of expectation and noted that they unilaterally expect all students to perform well on all assignments. Participant 2 described a dual set of expectations that she employs. Her expectations of what students will do in class are high, but she has learned based on performance not to expect homework and therefore, she does not assign it. Participants 1, 3, and 4 experience similar homework dilemmas, but they badger students to do it or make adjustment in class for the work to be done.

#### **Self-Fulfilling Prophecy (Observation)**

**Results:** Participants showed varying levels of expectations during instruction that in some cases contradicted their stated intentions. Participant 1 was highly engaged,

offered praise, and admonished homework failures. Participant 2 demonstrated preference for her high-level, classroom-tracked students. Participant 3 demonstrated an unintentional preference for her high-level, classroom-tracked students as they demanded her attention and she was unable to fulfill her expectations of individualized attention. Participant 4 demonstrated extremely high expectations and demanded the students meet them. She adjusted the lesson plan to accommodate individual needs and fully engaged students during instruction.

### **Self-Fulfilling Prophecy (Lesson Plans)**

**Results:** Participants 1 did not submit a lesson plan and Participants 2, 3, and 4 demonstrated varying degrees of expectations based on their submitted plans. Participant 2's written plan indicated low expectations, and her instructional performance demonstrated the same. These data contradict the participant's interview suggesting high expectations for all students. Participant 3's written plan indicated high expectations, but failed to deliver in practice. Observations negated the intentions of goals as stated on the lesson plan. The participant did indicate having relinquished expectations of homework during the interview session. Participant 4's written goals and objectives were met with extremely high expectations of the class. The participant fielded multiple questions from students simultaneously, circulated the room, and knelt beside students who needed assistance to ensure her expectations could be attained by the students.

**Research Question 3:** How do high school core-subject instructors who teach general education (low-level) track courses perceive their ability to teach general education students?

**Reflective Practice (Interview)**

**Results:** All participants indicated positive self-efficacy in their ability to teach lower level achievers; however they described varying degrees of effectiveness and self-reflection. Participant 1 indicated that he feel the need to reflect more on his ability to meet this group of students' extended set of needs. Participant 2 expressed simple enjoyment regarding her work with low-level students and no sense of reflection. Participant 3 noted an inclination to consider the moral ethic involved with teaching students who come to school disenfranchised. Participant 4 focused on the challenge of meeting the needs of low-level students and expressed concerns as to whether or not she was effective enough to have the necessary impact.

**Reflective Practice (Observation):**

**Results:** Participant 1 demonstrated confidence with his class and was able to connect with his students and convey the importance of their school work. Students responded and indicated that they worked for him because he instituted an expectation of responsibility. Participant 2 had an uncritical perception of her efficacy and it was reflected in her ability to capture her entire classes attention and address their needs. Students (low-level classroom tracked) indicated frustration when she did not answer questions. Participant 3 possessed an ethic of care toward her students, but was overwhelmed with the task of addressing the multiple sets of needs even among her classroom-tracked group. She mentioned smaller class sizes as a way to address this problem. She recognizes her shortcomings. Participant 4 is an accomplished teacher of low-level tracked students and continued to critique her practice in order to improve her

effectiveness. Her energy level and respect for her students are high, and this was demonstrated in her lesson.

### **Reflective Practice (Lesson Plan)**

**Results:** Participant 1 did not use a lesson plan and indicated his confidence in his ability. The interview and observation support his ability to teach low-level students, but do not suggest students are receiving the most challenge curriculum available. The absence of a lesson plan for this particular class might indicate his inability to articulate a connection between CCSS and the delivered curriculum. Participant 2 used a loose lesson plan that matched her apparent teaching ability. She perceived herself to enjoy working with low-level students, but was missing opportunities to maximize learning opportunities. She cited CCSS in the plan, but did not connect them to the learning objectives.

Participant 3 offered a plan that was structured to engage low-level students in critical thinking skills, but the participant was unable to fully execute the plan. While she made surface connection to CCSS through the goals and objectives, her inability to manage the large class hampered her effectiveness. Participant 4's self-efficacy was high although she still criticized her ability to fulfill the goals and objectives of her class. The lesson plan was well developed and executed. The relationships between CCSS and the delivered curriculum were evident and strong.

### **Trustworthy and Credibility**

Two constructs of great importance in qualitative study are trustworthiness and credibility. The first construct, trustworthiness, is the extent to which the researcher's



interpretations correctly reflect the phenomenon being studied. Merrim (1998) pointed out that time is an essential factor in developing trustworthy research results. The more time a researcher spends in the environment being studied, the more opportunities there are to observe a wide range of interactions and events. Time allows a broader view of the participant's world and the events that shape his or her perceptions and feelings. Time spent with interview participants building relationships leads to more honest and comprehensive dialogue once the interview process has begun. Creating an interview atmosphere that is unrushed and relaxed allows participants to feel comfortable expanding on thoughts or ideas and fosters confidence that the interviewer is interested in what they have to share.

Likewise, investment of time in the interview process helps to ensure that the interviewer is not ignoring possible topics for exploration or clarification for the sake of time constraints. In this study, participants were given copies of the interview format at least one week prior to their scheduled interview. This allowed them to think about the topics and formulate some of their thoughts prior to the interview. As one participant expressed, "Teachers don't like to take pop quizzes!" Many of the teachers thanked the researcher for sharing the topics ahead of time and expressed that it helped them feel better prepared and therefore more comfortable about being recorded. Some teachers also expressed that having the questions ahead of time gave them the opportunity to, "think about things they have never really had to put into words before" (Participant 4).

The fact that I had worked with all of the participants in my role as a coordinator seemed to make the interview process more informal and comfortable. I was someone

with whom they were familiar, who had some idea of the day-to-day experiences they go through. To ensure enough time was spent with each participant, teachers were asked to set the time and place of the interview themselves. All of the participants kept their scheduled time for the interview and observations. Several interviews took place in two sessions because of time pressures. If a participant had a great deal of insight to share or if the interview took a new path or direction, a second session was scheduled so that participants would not feel rushed to share their thoughts or reluctant to expound on topics that could provide valuable data.

The use of multiple data sources is another method of increasing the trustworthiness of research results. Using multiple investigators, multiple sources of data, or multiple methods to confirm the emerging findings is called “triangulation” (Merriam, 1998, p. 204). Triangulation methods were implemented in this research project by the collection of data through teacher interviews as well as observations of the participants in their classroom settings as they worked with students who have been identified as low achievers. As explained by Glesne and Peshkin (1992), the use of multiple data sources, “[I]s not to negate the utility of, say, a study based solely on interviews, but rather to indicate that the more sources tapped for understanding, the more believable the findings” (p. 24).

The second construct of importance, credibility, is essentially the degree to which the research findings can be verified by some other means. Interview participants shared in the interpretive process on two levels. First, they reviewed their own interview

transcripts for accuracy of content. Second, they were asked to review a final working draft of the research.

## **Chapter 5: Results, Conclusion, Implications, Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

With the advent of the new CCSS, school systems across the country now have a dire need for attaining a greater understanding of educational practices and their impact on student achievement. One educational practice that remains constant in many educational institutions today is that of tracking or grouping students into specific curriculum courses sequences dependent upon student abilities (Burris, 2003). In addition to the impact of tracking, the need to understand the effectiveness of what motivates students to learn and teachers to attain learning goals is also an essential part of understanding current teaching and education organizational practice (Pajares & Schunk, 2001).

Research conducted by Tschannen-Moren and Woolfolk Hoy (2001) and Pajares and Schunk (2001) explained the importance of the relationship between self-efficacy and educational practices and outcomes. The purpose of this research study was to gain a better understanding of the traditional practice of tracking students according to their presumed ability level and its influence on educational factors such as teacher perception of students, teacher expectations of students, teacher perception of self-efficacy, teacher instructional practice, and student academic achievement and learning. In this particular study, the issues of tracking and teacher perception of students who are tracked was only seen within the context of one high school and a group of teachers with three sources of evidence being used. Three research questions were used to guide the design and application of this single case research study. These research questions were as follows:

1. How do high school core-subject instructors of general education (low-level) track courses perceive academic tracking and the associated achievement gap?
2. What types of expectations do high school core-subject instructors who teach general education (low-level) track courses have regarding general education students?
3. How do high school core-subject instructors who teach general education (low-level) track courses perceive their ability to teach general education students?

For this research study, a 14-question semi-structured interview was designed to capture each individual's perspective on the topics. Direct classroom observations and teacher lesson plans were used to triangulate the data for this single case study. This chapter includes an analysis of the three sources of evidence utilized.

### **Summary of the Study**

This study adds to the understanding of ways in which schools can better support increased student achievement efforts by taking a closer look at the influence of tracking on the achievement gap, teacher expectations of students who enrolled in low-level courses, teachers perceptions of self-efficacy, and teacher instructional practice in low-level tracked classes. The information presented in this study provides educators and educational leaders with a better understanding of how tracking students impacts teacher perception of these students and their educational practices. A key component of this study is teacher self-efficacy. Prior studies on self-efficacy have been shown to have an influence on student achievement (Bandura, 1994; Hoy & Davis, 2006). In addition, this study provided more information and research on teacher practices in addressing the

educational issue of closing the achievement gap, which remains an issue in the education arena. (Burriss & Welner, 2005).

By exploring the influence of tracking, teacher practices were addressed through an exploration of how teachers perceive students who are tracked in low-level courses and how their perception influences delivery of their lessons. In addition, this research can help teachers and leaders gain a more thorough understanding of instructional practices associated with the different groupings and tracks by investigating the perceptions of self-efficacy with teachers and teacher instructional practices. This, in turn, can assist in providing a greater understanding of the influences of tracking on student achievement through administrative practices such as student scheduling and curriculum and teacher practices associated with instruction.

### **Summary of Findings**

**Research Question 1:** How do high school core-subject instructors of general education (low-level) track courses perceive academic tracking and the associated achievement gap?

The dominant perception of high school core-subject instructors is that tracking is effective and scrutiny of the system is unwarranted. Teachers with less experience relied more heavily on tracking as a perceived means of efficiently addressing individualized instruction. A minority of teachers perceived tracking negatively and critiqued the successfulness of the system.

**Research Question 2:** What types of expectations do high school core-subject instructors who teach general education (low-level) track courses have regarding general education students?

High school core-subject instructors who teach low-level track courses contended that their expectations for low-level tracked students are as high as their expectations for students in CP or honors classes. Associated race/ethnicity and/or gender did not positively impact teachers' expectations of students in practice. While all indicated a high level of expectations in theory, only the White female teacher demonstrated the high expectations she espoused in her narrative and exhibited in her lesson plan. Years of experience did positively impact teachers' expectations as shown through the two instructors with 21 and 30 years respectively demonstrating high expectations in practice.

Protheroe (2008) described teachers who have a strong sense of self-efficacy as having greater abilities and efforts related to lesson planning and preparation and execution of instructional strategies. The classroom observations were evidence of what was planned and implemented and the results garnered depended upon the effort devoted to quality instruction.

**Research Question 3:** How do high school core-subject instructors who teach general education (low-level) track courses perceive their ability to teach general education students?

High school core-subject instructors who teach low-level track courses perceive themselves as effective primarily based on their desire to work with the population of students they teach.

The majority of these teachers are not as effective as they believe based on the basic level, non-critical curricula, and the sub-tracking within classrooms used to attempt individualized instruction.

Based on racial/ethnic affiliation of the participants, Black teachers are no more effective with implementation of a challenging curriculum than their White counterparts and do not challenge the status quo of their students' designation or the system that disproportionately places Black students in low-level courses. Based on socioeconomic status affiliation of the participants, teachers with middle-class backgrounds are less effective at gauging their ability to teach low-level students and connect less effectively with the high ratio of low socioeconomic status students in low-track courses.

### **Recommendations**

The intent of this case study research was to gain a greater depth of understanding of how general education teachers perceive academic tracking and the achievement gap, their expectations of students who are tracked in low-level classes, and their self-efficacy to teach these students. The strength of the study included the investigation of three data sources, interviews, observations, and lesson planning in one context to gain that greater understanding. The narrow focus and the use of a group of four teachers from one school building with this case study precludes the results from being generalized to a larger population but does render the results applicable to similar populations.

While this study focused on mathematics and English teachers exclusively as participants in this study; the view of other subject area teachers may be vastly different than the teachers who participated in this study. The perceptions can change from



content area to content area. A case study including participants from more subject areas in secondary education could broaden the applicability of research in this vein.

### **Recommendation for Future Research**

Given the limitations of this single case study research and the new implementation of CCSS, there are some recommendations that could be pursued in later research.

1. Expanding this study to include more core-subject areas would expand the understanding of how tracking impacts student performance in the standardized testing areas.
2. Including student outcomes as a measure of efficacy would expand the understanding of this study's results beyond the participant's self-perceptions of their ability to teach low-level tracked students.
3. Increasing the time frame and conducting a longitudinal study might further illuminate the impact of teacher experience, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status and gender on the efficacy of instruction for low-level tracked student
4. Including administrator data might offer explanations for teacher perceptions toward tracking and their ability and/or willingness to challenge this traditional system.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The information collected for this study research has implications for the practitioner.

1. The traditional practice of tracking needs to be reviewed by school leaders and school districts to determine whether this particular form of course differentiation and student grouping practice is the best means of educating all students. There are several school districts and school systems that have de-tracked schools with great success. These models of de-tracked systems should be examined to see whether these models should be followed.
2. Teacher training courses should be fine-tuned to include opportunities for exposure of preservice teachers to an educational ecosystem that is diverse in regards to student grouping. The exposure would allow the teachers the opportunity to make the best and most informed decision for their classes.
3. The disproportionate numbers of Black students in lower level courses needs to be further investigated. Black students need to be encouraged to participate in higher numbers of higher-level courses for college readiness.

### **Implications**

Given the results of this study, school leadership needs to analyze the impact of current tracking systems. Teacher training program might explore alternative means for identifying preservice teachers with optimal dispositions to effectively educate diverse populations.

Professional development opportunities might provide expanded latitude for in-service teachers to experiment with adjusted grouping strategies and curriculum options.

Administrators at the building and district levels might consider unifying and raising expectations for a wider range of student learners and reducing the number of students identified and scheduled for low-level classes.

Educators at all levels might consider the social justice implications for acknowledging the conflicting evidence that tracking presents. The hegemonic practices evidenced in this study that reify social stratification in society must be challenged at every level. School leadership needs to analyze whether or not all students, regardless of race, who are in lower level courses are best served in these courses, especially if there is a greater chance that by simply being placed in these lower level courses there is a greater possibility for students not to achieve on standardized tests. With all the demands of accountability in the wake of CCSS, schools must attempt to investigate ways to bring all students to higher levels of academic performance.

This study also impacts the understanding of teacher performance and teacher self-efficacy. The relationship of self-efficacy to motivating students helps school leadership understand ways of improving school climate, culture, and student performance through teacher motivation and their ability to engage students in the learning process. Examples of teacher motivation in lower performing school districts with high socioeconomic student populations show the effectiveness of teacher belief systems on the ability to impact student learning. By learning more about how to promote efficacious teachers who have better skills in student engagement and instructional practices, students may have more opportunities for academic success.

## **Conclusion**

Although tracking is presumed to be the most common course of action to eliminate or at least minimize the achievement gap, it has likely done more to maintain the gap and perhaps widen it. CCSS hold little promise to address this problem if teachers do not effectively utilize them to create and deliver engaging curricula with high expectations. Moreover, the lower level classes are still saturated with more Blacks and socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Less attention has been given to helping these students and their academics and consequently more attention needs to be placed on the fact that these students are remaining separated from a population that, in the larger sphere, is desegregated. While teacher expectations—what is quoted in narratives and written in lesson plans— are important, teacher actions as conscious intervention—what is done in practice—more powerfully determine student outcomes (Goldberg, 1992)

The elimination of tracking could enable the halo effect to impact student achievement. As noted by Tauber regarding the self-fulfilling prophecy theory (1997), “[I]f you see good in someone that isn’t actually there, and you are persistent in seeing this good, the person on whom you have placed the halo may just live up to the goodness that you see.”

Is it possible to meet the needs of children who have been identified as low achievers and disband the traditional grade level division of students and reorganize classrooms to accommodate students’ actual academic abilities rather than where they are perceived to be?

By de-tracking the classroom, this could lessen the negative impact continual failure in traditional classrooms may have on self-esteem and motivation of children who are low-achievers by rewarding students for making learning gains at their own pace, rather than punishing them for failing to keep up with a pace imposed upon them.

In summary, students are no more prepared to take on the higher level of working in the lower tracked classes that were designed to remediate and catch up those students falling behind than they were before. Tracking has become more perfunctory policy rather than a theoretically sound and practically effective process designed to make sure students perform at the highest level of achievement. As the classes have been watered down and expectations lowered, so too have the passions of teachers in the belief that all students can perform at the expected levels of achievement. The educational system has taken on a one-track mind while encouraging a multi-track level of instruction that places students in positions to fall further behind rather than realizing and achieving their full potentials. The question still remains unanswered: If we remain separate, does this in any form hold the potential to make us equal?

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## **Appendix A: Letter to Participants**

Study Title: The Relationship between Student Achievement and Teacher Perception of Low Achievers

Dear Subject Participates,

My name is Hope Reed. I am a doctoral candidate in the Education Department at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirement of my degree in Curriculum Studies, and I would like to invite you to participate.

I am studying teachers' perceptions of their students in a high school setting. The general topic I want to explore will be how teachers perceive their students who are traditionally identified as low achievers. If you decided to participate, you will be asked to meet with me for one hour and 30 minutes for an interview session. In addition, I would like to observe your class for 40 minutes after the interview is completed. In particular, you will be asked questions about your perceptions and expectations of students who are in your lower level classes. The meeting will take place at Blythewood High School. The interview will be audio taped so that I can accurately reflect on what is discussed. The tapes will be transcribed by a professional transcriber. The tapes will be analyzed and reviewed by the members of the research team. They will then be destroyed.

Participation is confidential. Study information will be kept in a source location at the University of South Carolina. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meeting, but your identity will not be revealed.

You will receive \$50.00 upon the completion of the interview and observations for your time. If you withdraw from the study prior to the conclusion, you will receive \$25.00.

Taking part in the study is your decision. You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You may quit being in the study at any time or decide not to answer any question you are not comfortable answering.

We will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at (803)-665-0246 or [hreed@richland2.org](mailto:hreed@richland2.org) or my faculty advisor, Rhonda Jeffries, (803) 777-7000, [rjeffrie@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:rjeffrie@mailbox.sc.edu) if you have related questions or problems. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance at the University of South Carolina at (803) 777-7095.

Thank you for your consideration. If you would like to participate, please sign below and return to me in room 522.

With kind regards,

Hope Reed

401 Beaumont Park Circle

Blythewood, SC

(803) 691-4090

[hreed@richland2.org](mailto:hreed@richland2.org)

I understand the procedures and conditions of my participation described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study.

I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date