

Spring 2023

Deficit Thinking in Teacher Course Level Recommendations

Andrew Hogan

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Deficit Thinking in Teacher Course Level Recommendations

by

Andrew Hogan

Bachelor of Arts
University of Tennessee, 2014

Masters of Science
University of Tennessee, 2015

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education in

Curriculum and Instruction

College of Education

University of South Carolina

2023

Accepted by:

Dr. Linda Silvernail, Major Professor

Dr. Erin Carson, Committee Member

Dr. Robert Doan, Committee Member

Dr. Jeffery Eargle, Committee Member

Dr. Becky Morgan, Committee Member

Cheryl L. Addy, Interim Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to analyze teacher perceptions of the impact of deficit thinking in student course level placement to derive greater insight into the causes of the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes. This study was conducted as a virtual focus group using Google Meet that took place across 3 meetings in which 6 teachers participated in activities designed to promote dialogue around the impact of deficit thinking in the placement of students into course levels.

This study found that teachers perceived deficit thinking in institutional deficiencies in meeting the needs of students and the practices of individual teachers that disadvantaged underserved students, particularly English language learners and students of low socioeconomic status, as impactful in determining student course level placement. Additionally, this study identified ways in which teacher displayed deficit thinking implicitly in their recommendations, which often favored students who were perceived to be more likely to perform well on standardized tests, as impactful in students course level placement. Additionally, implicit bias from the participants was shown in the form of blaming parents and the student body for the low achievement of students in lower-tracked classes. Neither of these two forms of implicit deficit thinking was identified by the participants.

This study also found that while teachers are aware that deficit thinking is impactful in determining which course level students are placed into, simply making teachers aware of deficit thinking is not enough to change teacher practices. This is due to

the teachers' perception that the system of course recommendations for student course level was not offset by the ability of parents to override the recommendation of the teachers and the pressure from administration to recommend students who will most likely to succeed on the standardized tests for AP classes as opposed to students who may not traditionally be represented in higher-stakes classes. Ultimately, the participants felt that their course recommendations did not have a substantial bearing on the academic achievement of students..

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“This is your dumb class, right?” asked a fifteen-year-old student towards the end of class. I remember being astonished by the question. I also remember trying to carefully craft my response because this was a much more difficult class to manage and teach than my others.

It was my first year teaching at a rural school in Knoxville, Tennessee. I was teaching government to sophomores and, being the newest teacher, I was given many of the classes that other teachers did not want to teach. Specifically, I was given a number of college preparatory (CP) classes. In this particular school, students were tracked and placed into three different levels: CP, Honors, or Advanced Placement. All my classes were students in designated CP classes.

Systems of tracking students based on academic performance is not unique to this school. Schools across the country participate in systems of curriculum tracking, citing the importance of homogeneously grouping students based on academics so that instruction can be differentiated to meet students where they are, and students can have access to education that is more suited for them (Slavin, 1990). Before I could provide a response to my student, he continued, “Yeah, I know why I’m in here. I made a lot of mistakes in middle school. I really was a bad kid, and I was going through a lot, but I am really trying to work harder now.” He then inundated me with stories of his childhood - how he grew up on the wrong side of town, how his father was killed in a gang-

related shooting, how his mother had recently moved them to this side of town to get away from the violence.

I have had thousands of interactions with students, but this is one that I still consider fairly often, not because of the content of the talk but because of the way the student initiated the conversation. Although I have had many challenging classes, this class differed in many ways. First, the class was at maximum capacity of 25 students, larger than the reported average for the school. Additionally, two-thirds of the students had an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or 504 plan. Most significantly, in this class Black students were the majority in a school that was over 70% White.

Since this interaction I have worked at another school that implements similar forms of tracking. I acknowledge that there are many benefits to homogeneous ability grouping of students; however, in each school where I have worked, the trend of over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes has remained constant. While racial discrimination in education has been formally banned in the United States, the legacy of racism still impacts the structure of the institution today. For example, housing discrimination of the Jim Crow era has contributed to the school district analyzed for this study being racially divided, reporting a student body consisting of 45.9% students of color, yet the student body of one high school in the district consists of 72% students of color. However even in schools that are well integrated research indicates that most students of color are likely to be segregated into lower-tracked classes, even when they provide similar test scores (Gamoran, 2009; Perna, 2005; Starck et al., 2020). While it is easy for some to spot the historical causes and trends that contribute to discrimination the educational system, it is more difficult to identify factors that perpetuate the phenomenon

of interschool segregation through curriculum tracking and more difficult still to provide attainable solutions.

Context

Although curriculum tracking has been a defining practice in American education since the early 1900's, tracking has grown considerably more controversial in the post-war era. Wheelock's (1992) historical analysis of curriculum tracking found that Cold War politics of the late 1900's pushed education to be more centered on post-secondary education, as opposed to vocational and life skills training that had defined middle and high school up to this point. Additionally, in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement many educational and civil rights groups began to identify tracking as a loophole to avoid efforts of the federal government to integrate schools (Wheelock, 1992).

Throughout the 1990's, progressive educators and stakeholders began to question the system of curriculum tracking that had become a defining feature of American schooling. The "Detracking" movement called for an end to the traditional form of student ability grouping, demanding all stakeholders reevaluate and restructure the practices in their local schools to best serve the needs of all students (Torres & Mitchell, 1998). Torres & Mitchell (1998) claimed that the detracking movement received broad support from state and federal politicians of both political parties, with some republicans even calling for the abolition of remedial tracked classes, but unfortunately detracking received significant pushback from local communities and school boards.

The highly decentralized nature of education in the United States has led to an uneven application of detracking (Loveless, 2009). Loveless asserted that having a higher number of students who participate in the free or reduced lunch program, is often an

indicator of the socioeconomic status of the community in which the school is located, which are more likely to embrace the tenets of detracking. Additionally, it is important to note that, although the number of detracked schools in the United States have increased significantly, detracked schools still account for less than half of schools in the United States (Hallinan, 2004; Loveless 2009).

Despite the attempts in recent decades to reform the system of curriculum tracking, historical forms of oppression such as slavery and redlining still impact the institution of education. People who live in the southeastern region of the United States, where this study was conducted and the institution slavery was most prevalent, display higher rates of pro-White bias that in other parts of the country (Payne et. al, 2019). Educators, often thought to be more progressive than the rest of society, display comparable levels of bias to non-teachers (Strack et al., 2020).

While relevant research shows that implicit biases in teachers have a direct effect on student outcomes (McCardle, 2020), there is a gap in the research in regards to the way implicit bias, particularly in the form of deficit thinking, impacts teacher course level recommendations and strategies to address this thinking.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks used to contextualize this study connects deficit thinking and sociocultural learning. Deficit thinking refers to the act of blaming inequitable outcomes of historically oppressed groups on individuals or communities as opposed to institutional barriers (Davis & Museus, 2019; Valencia, 1997). Deficit thinking as a discourse has its roots in early American justifications for institutional oppression, such as the institution of slavery or displacement of indigenous peoples

(Menchaca, 1997). Deficit thinking in education refers to the view that historically oppressed students have inherent individual or cultural “defects” such as lack of ability, motivation, and parental support that hinder academic achievement.

Deficit thinking can materialize as implicit bias that can negatively impact teachers’ judgements and decisions. Consequently, much research has been done regarding the nature of implicit bias in perpetuating the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes (Campbell, 2012; Strack et al., 2020). For the purposes of this study, implicit bias will be addressed through the lens of deficit thinking as deficit thinking shifts the culpability from the individual educator and places greater emphasis on the role of culture and institutions (Davis & Museus, 2019), which will allow for greater alignment with the sociocultural learning theory.

Sociocultural learning theory, developed by Lev Vygotsky (1977), became prominent in educational discourse in the 1970’s. Sociocultural learning theory is similar to other constructivist theories in that learners construct and scaffold knowledge, but Vygotsky placed more emphasis on the learning environment. Sociocultural theory claims that knowledge is first developed through interactions of the learner within the social context for which they exist, and then processed internally within the learner (Vygotsky, 1977). Consequently, Vygotsky claimed that the growth of the learner is constrained to the conditions of the learning environment. He refers to the area for which a child is capable of learning but requires the assistance of someone more advanced as the zone of proximal development.

Sociocultural theory holds that most knowledge is acquired through interactions within our community. This serves as the base for the way that values and beliefs are

transmitted through a society, including deficit thinking. Deficit thinking, being implicit in nature, often manifests itself in thoughts and actions that are unassuming to those who do not take the time to critically analyze their own biases. While sociocultural theory may explain how deficit thinking imbeds itself within members of the community, collaboration and interaction among peers can be a successful tool in critically analyzing implicit biases in order to address deficit thinking in teacher practices.

Study Purpose Statement and Research Questions

Although education as an institution has made a push to become more equitable in recent decades, there is still the question of how to best address the issue of overrepresentation of students of color in lower-tracked classes. While broader institutional reforms such as detracking are slow to be adopted, action research provides educators with a means to explore the issues facing education in ways that they can actively participate in the solution (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Chiu, 2003). The purpose of this study was to examine teacher perceptions of the ways deficit thinking affects course level placement of students to gain greater insights into the causes of the overrepresentation of students of color in lower-track courses. To meet these ends the following research questions will drive this study:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of the impact of deficit thinking in high school students' course level placement?
2. How does a teacher's awareness of deficit thinking impact their course level recommendations?

One goal of the first research question was to identify the extent to which teacher perceived deficit thinking as impactful on student course recommendations. While

research has proven that criteria for course level recommendations is often very subjective (Brooks & Rodela, 2018; Bernhardt, 2014) and that teachers do carry bias throughout this process (Strack et al., 2020; Campbell, 2012), the extent to which course level recommendations are deficit minded is less clear. Understanding the way teachers understand the impact of deficit thinking in the course level placement of students granted a greater insight into the causes of the over-representation of students of color into lower-tracked classes. Framing this question within the scope of deficit thinking allowed me to more concisely differentiate aspects of the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes that result from institutional deficiencies and individual biases.

The identification of specific examples of deficit thinking identified by participants in the study allowed for analysis of the second research question regarding the extent to which an awareness of deficit thinking is would impact a teacher's course level recommendations. This awareness would allow for critical reflection that results in change of perception of the teachers' role in perpetuating the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes through common course recommendation practices. The goal of action research is to invite stakeholders to collaborate in a process that eventually results in change (Herr & Anderson, 2015). This study attempted to use the tenets of sociocultural learning to develop a change in the way teachers perceive their roles in perpetuating inequality through the criteria each individual teacher used to recommend students for various curriculum tracks.

The issues surrounding curriculum tracking are not unknown. Stakeholders both from the present and past generations shaped the education system, oftentimes unknowingly, in a manner that created unequal opportunities for students of color. These

research questions were designed to examine the effects of educators reflecting on their own role in perpetuating the over-representation of students in lower-tracked classes and developing solutions within their own practices.

Positionality Statement

Positionality is the attempt of the researcher-practitioner to gauge their relationship to the study (Herr & Anderson, 2014). I began my educational career working at a Title 1 School in the inner city of Knoxville, Tennessee. Although the student population of this school was predominantly Black, the advanced placement (AP) classes consisted almost entirely of White students. Knoxville itself is a very segregated city, and I felt that the curriculum tracking system in this school was a way to preserve segregation. I currently teach at a public-magnet-choice school in the suburbs that serves a predominantly upper middle-class demographic, with a majority White student population. Despite the dramatic differences in each of these learning institutions, the problem of practice, students of colors being disproportionately placed in lower-tracked classes, remains present at each.

The most effective way to define the positionality of this dissertation is that of the insider collaborating with other insiders (Herr and Anderson, 2014). I facilitated a virtual focus group through Google Meet where six teachers work collaboratively to complete activities that identify the nature of deficit thinking in the teacher course level recommendation process. The advantage of working with fellow teachers is that I was seen as an insider, equally as affected by the problem of practice as the others in the virtual focus group, which helped avoid any of the power dynamics that could emerge from leading a study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Research Design

This qualitative study followed the practices outlined in participatory action research. This design is most appropriate for this study as it calls for participants to investigate their practices in order to develop a new understanding of their course level recommendation practices with the goal of creating more equitable outcomes for students (Herr & Anderson, 2015). The nature of action research as geared towards social justice is at the heart of this study, as the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes stems from a legacy of injustice towards people of color in the United States.

The participants of this study were six secondary social studies teachers from a large suburban school district in the southern United States. The participants were selected with the goal of creating a diverse and knowledgeable collaboration of educators with a wide array of experiences that reflected the demographic makeup of most schools in the United States. To achieve this end, exclusion criteria for choosing participants included the requirement that they were currently working as a teacher and had at least three years of experience making course level recommendations. In this study four of the educators were female and two were male, and one identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Participants' teaching experience ranged from 5-36 years, and half had taught in various states. No teachers of color volunteered to participate in this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study was conducted as a virtual focus group using Google Meet that took place across 3 meetings. Focus groups are particularly relevant in the field of action research as they provide a natural framework for exposing participants to the problem of

practice and inviting them to participate in formulating solutions (Chiu, 2003). I gathered qualitative data during these meetings using audio recordings and artifacts. This data was later transcribed and coded to find overarching themes related to the rationale of the teacher course level recommendation criteria among the participants.

To stimulate discussion for data collection, I implemented activities in which group members were required to be interactive. For example, I asked them to determine course placements for a range of students presented in short vignettes. Vignettes are a powerful tool used to understand beliefs and practices of a group as they allow participants to reflect on and improve their practices through discussion of a realistic event (Spalding & Phillips, 2007). Another tool used to stimulate conversation among participants was the Q-sort, a rating system which asked participants to rate criteria according to the significance for a student of being placed in higher-tracked classes. Ultimately, data from these artifacts from these activities were analyzed and used to complement the qualitative data gathered from group discussions in order to reach triangulation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2014).

Following the focus group intervention, I conducted individual interviews with each participant. These interviews were coded to identify the significance of the change in participants and to reach saturation of data within the study.

Significance and Limitations of the Study

The content of this study is particularly relevant to the school district from which the participants are selected. In 2007, one district middle school took steps towards detracking. This middle school served predominantly students of color and a higher proportion of students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). However, testing

policy changed with the No Child Left Behind Act which required all students to be counted in standardized test scores, including those who would have previously been exempt. Consequently, this school scored lower on standardized tests than any other middle school in the district. Initially, professional learning communities of teachers grouped by content area were asked if they were willing to remove curriculum track distinctions in their classes. Over the next five years the entire middle school removed curriculum track designations and students achieved significantly higher scores throughout the school.

However, changes in administration and district initiatives pushed by other schools intensified the need for curriculum tracking; consequently, this middle school reverted back to tracking in 2012. This anecdote illustrates the imbedded nature of course level tracking within the district and justifies further analysis of the nature of course level placement of students. It is worth noting that as this experiment with detracking began with teacher buy in, it is appropriate to continue research into the effects of course level tracking by first attempting to understand the rationale of teachers when they make their course level recommendations.

Furthermore, this study's emphasis on deficit thinking will provide a significant distinction in the previous work surrounding course level recommendations and implicit bias in teachers, as it emphasizes institutional culpability of disparities in academic performance as opposed to individual faults. There have already been numerous studies conducted on the nature of implicit biases among teachers (Strack et al., 2020; Campbell, 2012) and the subjective nature of teacher course level recommendations (Brooks & Rodela, 2018; Bernhardt, 2014). This study attempted to fill the gap in the research between these two ideas by identifying specific beliefs that can be addressed in the

teacher course level recommendation process. The intended audience of this study was secondary educators in hopes that this study would encourage others to critically evaluate their own course level recommendation practices in order to address the problem of overrepresentation of students of color in lower-tracked classes. However, it is significant to note that action research itself is limited in its ability to be generalized to a larger population outside of the context for which the study takes place (Herr & Anderson, 2014). Consequently, one limitation of this study is its narrow scope based on a single focus group of teachers in one school district.

Perhaps the most limiting factor of this study is the time frame in which the study was conducted. To achieve a greater saturation of data, this study could have been conducted with multiple focus groups consisting of a variety of teacher representing different racial, ethnic, and professional backgrounds. Additionally, having a longer time frame would have mitigated the scheduling conflicts experienced by the participants, and would have allowed more time to recruit teachers of color to participate in this activity. Although valuable insights were gathered from the participants of this study, the lack of people of color from the participants limits the number of perspectives received on this issue.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized to best disseminate the research surrounding my study and the results of our study as well. Chapter Two consists of a literature review, in which scholarly articles regarding the nature and attempts to address implicit bias among teachers and course level recommendation practices will be synthesized to provide a broader context of the problem. Chapter Three details the methods for collecting and

analyzing data, including the rationale for each of the phases of the virtual focus group and the data collection tools, as well as the process for coding and analyzing the data. Chapter Four includes the findings of the research after the data analysis and finally, Chapter Five will provide the implications of the study, including a discussion of the findings, and recommendations for future practices regarding the intervention and the problem of practice.

Definitions

- Deficit Thinking: The belief that inequitable outcomes and struggles of individuals from oppressed groups is the result of deficiencies in the individual and/or their community as opposed to larger institutional failures.
- Teacher Course Level Recommendation: The process in which teachers suggest a curriculum track for students to be placed on.
- Focus Group: A group interview with experts in a particular subject.
- Curriculum Tracks: The system of grouping students homogeneously by ability level in different academic levels within a school.
- Vignette: A short description of a real event used to collect data.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this study was to help teachers become aware of deficit thinking in their course level recommendation practices in order to address the problem of practice: the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes. A focus group of teachers gathered via Google Meet to discuss the criteria used to recommend students for the various curriculum tracks and identify deficit thinking in our practices. The research group was conducted to address the following research questions:

- 1) What are teachers' perceptions of the impact of deficit thinking in high school students' course level placement?
- 2) How does a teacher's awareness of deficit thinking impact their course level recommendations?

A literature review is important in all forms of research to set a foundation for the advancement of knowledge and synthesizing current information to identify areas that could benefit from more research (Snyder, 2019). This literature review was conducted using a variety of online sources. Google Scholar was used as the primary tool to locate articles relevant to the problem of practice and the research questions. After the articles have been identified using Google Scholar, the articles were accessed in their entirety from internet databases such as JSTOR and

SAGE publications. The literature selected was primarily peer reviewed articles that were published within the last 10 years to ensure that the review is the most relevant information, however other sources such as foundational and seminal sources that were written before this time frame may be considered as well.

The following literature review was structured thematically to provide alignment with the project that best allows for synthesis and critique of current literature (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This review begins with a discussion of the literature surrounding the problem of practice, including the significance of curriculum tracks and the common practices of teacher course level recommendations. Afterwards, a broader discussion of deficit mindset theory and sociocultural learning theory, the two theoretical frameworks used to broadly shape this study, are described. Finally, this chapter delves into the research surrounding the methods and practices used in the intervention.

Inequities of Curriculum Tracking

To best understand the importance of teacher course level recommendations on a student's academic trajectory it is important to first understand the role of curriculum tracks in the broader institution of education. This section analyzes the factors that contribute to curriculum track placement and the significance of curriculum track placement for students. This is followed by a discussion of the literature surrounding the practice of teacher course level recommendations for placing students into curriculum tracks.

Curriculum tracking is the process in which students are placed into specific course sequences with students who share common personal qualities or similar academic performances (Vanfossen et al., 1987) Despite efforts to address inequities in education,

students of color are still over-represented in lower-tracked classes. This is due to multiple gatekeeping methods, many of which are still imbued with implicit racial biases. Currently, students are placed into higher or lower academic tracks based on numerous factors including standardized test scores, teacher course level recommendations, grades, and student and parent preferences (Heubert & Hauser, 1999). Some of these gatekeepers into higher-tracked courses, such as standardized tests, were created with the explicit purpose of maintaining a segregated education system (Rosales, 2018). Other qualifiers, such as teacher course level recommendations, preserve the status quo through implicit biases that reflect and reinforce the cultural stereotypes surrounding people of color, often held without the realization of the teacher (McCardle, 2020). Teachers are just as likely to hold implicit racial biases as other members of society, and those biases can affect the expectations that teachers hold for students of color and their unwillingness to place students of color into higher-tracked courses (Starck et al., 2020).

Being placed in lower-tracked classes has a profoundly negative impact on the quality of education a student receives. The emphasis by legislators and administrators to achieve on “high-stakes tests” can lead to inequitable distribution of resources to higher-tracked classes (Dworkin, 2005). According to a study conducted by the Hanover Research Institution (2015), lower-tracked classes are generally taught by less experienced teachers and these classes offer a curriculum that is slower paced and covers less content. These disadvantages perpetuate a reinforcing causal loop in which students who are initially placed into lower-tracked classes are repeatedly placed in lower-tracked classes because of their lack of academic support and are eventually less positioned to

achieve economic independence in life after academia as illustrated in Figure 2.1 (Abel & Deitz, 2019).

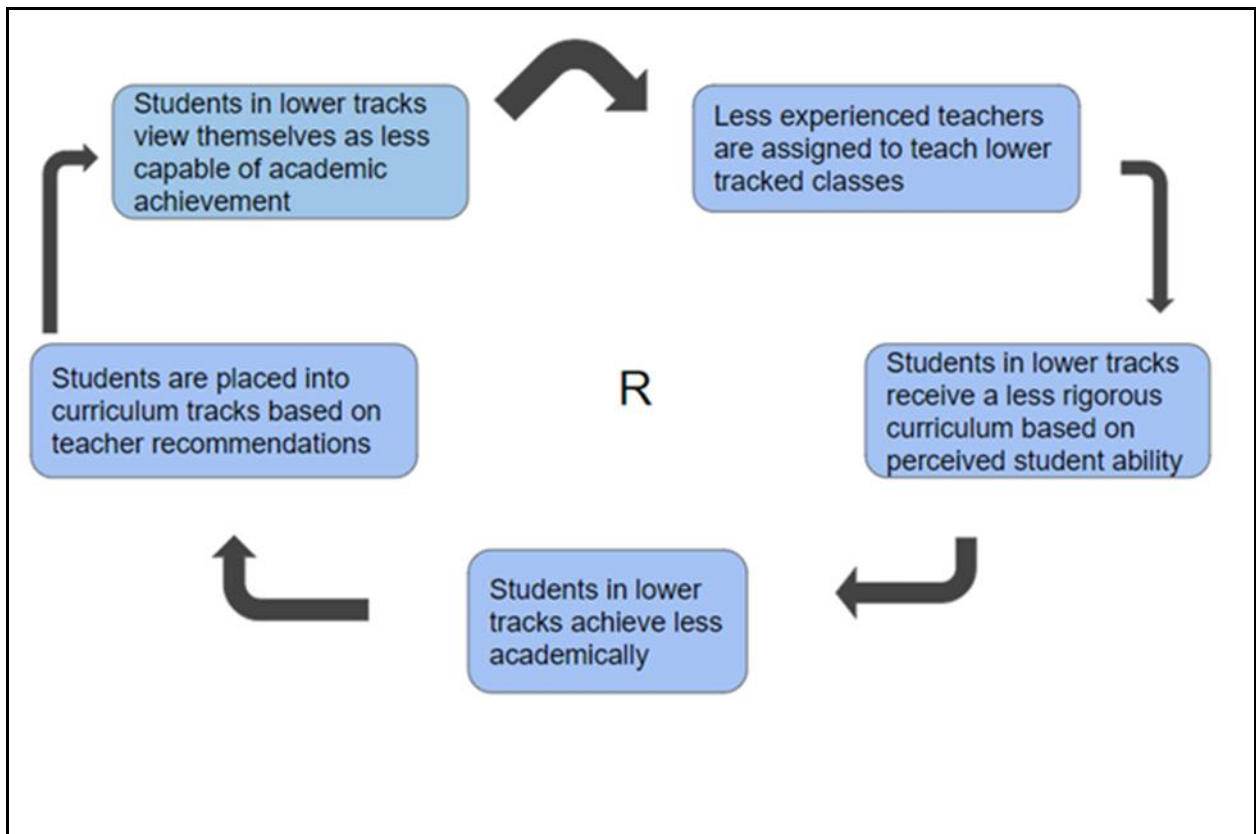


Figure 2.1: The Reinforcing Causal Loop Created in Curriculum Tracking

Additionally, there are numerous opportunities afforded to students who are placed into higher-tracked classes that are not available to students in lower-tracked classes. Many of the higher-tracked classes offer the opportunity to receive college credit for a lower cost than traditional college enrollment and can boost a student's chances of being accepted into a post-secondary school (Perna et al., 2015). Despite the well-documented fact that a college graduate is likely to earn significantly more throughout his life than their counterpart with a high-school diploma (Abel & Deitz, 2019), students of

color are still consistently limited by inadequate academic preparation in lower-tracked courses for post-secondary education (Perna, 2005).

Course Level Recommendation Practices

Today, patterns of race and socioeconomic status within the curriculum tracking system still persist which can ultimately ensure that students of color are provided with a lower quality education. Maika Watanabe (2008) observed a middle school in North Carolina as part of an ethnographic study and concluded that students in “academically gifted” classes had greater opportunities to engage in a wider array of writing skills, a more refined curriculum, more challenging instruction, and received more direct feedback for their work than students in lower-tracked classes. While oftentimes the differentiation provided as a part of curriculum tracking is seen as a way to address students’ needs (Loveless, 2009), Watanabe asserts that the differences observed fail to address structural inequalities already found within its schooling system.

When discussing the inequalities identified by Watanabe, it is important to note that students of color are significantly more likely to be placed in lower-tracked class compared to their White peers (Kelly, 2009; Oakes, 2005). In an attempt to study teacher course level recommendations, one of the primary elements of student course placement, Bernhardt (2014) provided vignettes to three social studies teachers in order to evaluate their process for course level recommendations. Bernhardt’s study showed that teachers were given an enormous amount of autonomy in the teacher recommendation process; unfortunately, this autonomy seemed to stem from a lack of communication, expectations, and criteria among teachers and from administration. Furthermore, Bernhardt both identifies “meritocratic” and “non-meritocratic” criteria that teachers

consider when recommending students for curriculum tracks. While meritocratic standards that prove objectively a student's ability to succeed in a higher-tracked course are considered, so are non-meritocratic standards, including attitude, enthusiasm, but race and socioeconomic status as well.

The lack of guidance in the teacher recommendation process as well as the use of non-meritocratic standards can be troubling for students as they try to move from one curriculum track to another. A study conducted by Maneka Brooks and Katherine Rodela (2018) interviewed 10 students and one teacher at an economically disadvantaged school to determine the entry and exit criteria for reading intervention class. Additionally, the authors wanted to know how aware the students were of what the entry and exit criteria for the program were. The study found that while entry criteria remained consistent, there was no guidance surrounding exit criteria, which often led to shifting goals. Additionally, the students were not fully aware of either the entry or exit criteria. The inability of students to easily leave these reading intervention classes prevented the students from participating in electives offered at the same time, which contributes to an inequitable educational experience for students required to take the class.

Non-meritocratic standards of student achievement become significant in the teacher recommendation process when combined with a discussion of implicit bias in educators. Implicit bias is traditionally understood as the unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that an individual holds. Strack et al. (2020) analyzed data gathered from Project Implicit, a program that records the results of hundreds of thousands of self-administered Implicit Association Tests (IATs) to conduct two studies. The first study analyzed almost 1.7 million responses, excluding responses that did not specify

occupation, were from outside of the United States, or which indicated the respondent was under the age of 18. The authors then divided the responses by teachers and non-teachers and compared the aggregated results of the IAT scores and discovered that teachers exhibit the same amount of implicit bias as non-teachers. The second study analyzed much of the same information, but used a model of sample selection that only selected 1,984 participants and over selected participants from Black and Latino communities to ensure that the communities of color were accurately represented in this study. This second study showed that despite adjusting for demographic factors, levels of implicit bias among teachers was consistent with levels of implicit bias among non-teachers.

Implicit biases in teachers is particularly problematic because it is difficult to address. Lai et. al. (2016) conducted a study to see how these implicit biases could be addressed. After conducting 9 different interventions, the researchers were able to conclude that while many had positive short-term effects in mitigating implicit biases, none were effective in maintaining lower levels of implicit biases over time. However, another study re-examined this data and concluded that the regression of implicit bias was not the fault of the individual, but rather the collective bias of the environment that consumes the subject (Vuletich & Payne, 2019).

Oftentimes these implicit biases found in non-meritocratic standards specifically hurt students of color. Shanyce Campbell (2012) conducted a study to determine what cognitive and non-cognitive factors of Black girls are taken into consideration for course level recommendations. Surveys were given to students, teachers, and administrators in order to create a complete picture of the socio-demographic environment of the students

as well as the work environment and general well-being of the school. This study ultimately found that some factors such as participation in class and self-efficacy prove to be large factors in determining what track a Black girl would be placed in. However, the study also found that there was a correlation between the teacher assumption of the students' future academic trajectory that influenced the curriculum track a Black girl would be placed in. If a teacher anticipated a student would complete college or graduate school, they would often recommend them for a higher course track.

When synthesized, the nature of curriculum tracking combined with common practices of teacher course level recommendation create a picture of a difficult to surmount social justice issue. The deficits in the quality of education found in lower-tracked classes perpetuate underachievement in students, which ensures that there is little opportunity for students meet the meritocratic criteria required to move into higher-tracked classes. Additionally, even if students are capable of overcoming these odds to meet the often-ill-defined meritocratic criteria to move into higher-tracked classes, non-meritocratic standards used to determine curriculum track placement are subjective and therefor can be influenced by the teacher's implicit biases and deficit thinking. This cycle not only works to deny students of color access to opportunities to achieve college credit from their high school classes, but it leaves these students underprepared for higher education, and can therefor impact their future earnings after their academic career.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the study involved the sociocultural theory of learning and deficit thinking. The socio-cultural learning theory, which highlights the significance of community in the learning process, helps to contextualize deficit thinking

as a result of the cultural perception of education as a democratic and meritocratic process. Deficit thinking, which manifests as the blaming individuals or communities from historically marginalized backgrounds to blame for the challenges and inequities they face (Davis & Museus, 2019) serves as a vehicle for which implicit biases impact the teacher course level recommendation process.

Sociocultural learning theory was coined by Russian educational theorist Lev Vygotsky (1978). Sociocultural learning theory claims foremost that learning happens primarily through an individual's interactions with their communities and that all learning happened first interpersonally, then intrapersonally (Vygotsky, 1978). While these ideas built upon the concepts of learners scaffolding and constructing knowledge, Vygotsky's work differed from previous educational constructivist ideas in that he emphasized the constraints of the learning environment (Cole & Wertsch, 1996). This is displayed clearly through Vygotsky's concept of Zones of Proximal Development, which refers to the knowledge that exists beyond what the student can accomplish through their independent problem solving and can only be accomplished with the assistance of an adult or a more capable peer (Vygotsky, 1978).

Valencia (1997) identifies "six characteristics of deficit thinking . . . : 1) Blaming the victim, 2) institutional oppression, 3) pseudoscience used to justify the deficit mindset, 4) temporal changes, or the idea that deficit thinking can shift justifications based on the relevant discussions of the time, 5) educability of minority groups, 6) heterodoxy" of the dominant class (p. 3). Using this characterization, it is easy to find examples of deficit thinking dating back centuries, originating from discourse surrounding the justification for subjugating minority groups (Menchaca, 1997).

Scholarly literature such as William Ryan's *Blaming the Victim* (1976), which analyzed how stereotypes and biases about people of color were used to slow progress following the civil rights movement, reflected the characteristics of deficit thinking despite predating the term. In recent decades the academic community has spent considerable energy identifying deficit thinking and developing methods to counter its harmful influences, however the implicit and pervasive nature of deficit thinking makes it difficult to address (Davis & Museus, 2019).

Utilizing sociocultural learning theory and deficit thinking as the theoretical framework for this study helps to frame not only the causes of problem of practice, but also guides the intervention to address the issue as well. The zone of proximal development illustrates what is capable for a student to learn with the assistance of another member in the community, but also clearly highlights the limits of what can be learned due to the limits of the assisting adult. The implicit nature of deficit thinking being embedded in our institutions and culture implies that we are likely proliferating deficit thinking within our community, where socio-cultural theory asserts that learning predominantly happens unless we are critically aware of our own implicit biases. Alternatively, if a member of the community is aware of deficit thinking, the zone of proximal development should allow for the community as a whole to begin to analyze their own implicit biases.

Focus Groups as Intervention

Sociocultural learning theory and deficit thinking also serve to guide the intervention, which uses the tenets of socio-cultural learning to allow teachers to explore and address deficit thinking in their own practices through the participation in a virtual

focus group of their peers using Google Meet. A focus group is a technique of in-depth group interviews conducted with carefully selected participants who can provide insight on a given topic (Thomas et al., 1995). The main purpose of a focus group is to understand and explain the beliefs and cultures that influence the behaviors and attitudes of individuals (Rabiee, 2004), which served to answer the first research question of identifying the already existing extent of deficit thinking in teacher course level recommendations.

However, Lai Chiu (2003) elaborated on the use of focus groups as a means to conduct participatory action research. After conducting three participatory action research focus groups, Chiu reflects on the process and establishes that focus groups can serve to increase participation and therefore invite participants to critically examine their own beliefs and bring change by developing solutions (p. 176). This level of participation among participants is crucial to allowing for critical awareness of the participants and the researchers deficit thinking and developing change in teacher perceptions as stated in the second research question.

Summary

This study is conducted with the purpose of examining teacher perceptions of the ways deficit thinking affects course level placement of students to gain greater insights into the causes of the overrepresentation of students of color in lower-track courses. The literature review shows the necessity of this study by highlighting the levels of implicit biases observed in the research among teachers as well as the wide range and often changing criteria used by teachers to place students into curriculum tracks, and finally the significance of the tools and methods that were used in the intervention. The remaining

chapters detail the research methods and procedures used to address the research questions, followed by a chapter analyzing and interpreting the data before finally discussing the greater implication of the study.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH DESIGN

Overview

The problem of practice that this study addressed is the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes by answering the following research questions:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of the impact of deficit thinking in high school students' course level placement?
2. How does a teacher's awareness of deficit thinking impact their course level recommendations?

This study was conducted through the lens of the deficit thinking and sociocultural learning theoretical frameworks. Deficit thinking is a belief that students, families, and factors within the community of historically marginalized peoples are often blamed for inequities across social outcomes, which absolves larger institutional failure and inequalities from responsibility (Davis & Museus, 2019). Sociocultural learning theory asserts that knowledge is first developed through individual interactions with the community (Vygotsky, 1997). This combination underpinned the data analysis and the intervention. Through collaboration in a virtual focus group of educators using Google Meet, these theories work in tandem with the aim of developing change in teachers' perceptions of their role in maintaining inequities among students of

color by examining deficit thinking in course level recommendation practices and ways to mitigate it.

In this chapter I have described the research design and intervention, including the rationale for each phase of the intervention and my role as a researcher and a participant. Additionally, I discussed the procedure for collecting and analyzing the qualitative data that was gathered from the virtual focus groups and interviews and the various forms of technology that were used to collect the data. Finally, gave insight into how the qualitative data was coded and processed to provide answers that explicitly answer the question.

Research Design and Intervention

This qualitative study followed the principles of critical participatory action research in an effort not only to expose and change traditional power structures, but also to invite the participants of the study to take control of the issues of inequity within their learning community (Pyrch, 2007). This design is particularly relevant because it ties the intervention directly back to the theoretical framework by attempting to address deficit thinking in individuals as a means of reforming a substantial institutional failure.

This study addressed the problem of practice, the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked courses, in a large school district outside of a major metropolitan area of the southern United States. This district consists of three traditional high schools and one choice magnet school, each with a population of over 1,000 students. While the district overall is very diverse with a student body that consists of 45.9% non-White students, a legacy of institutional discrimination has led to a very segregated school district, with the student body of one high school consisting of 72%

students of color while the student bodies of other high schools in the district average only 31.9% of the student body as students of color. While in general this school district is very successful, consistently scoring above the state average on all standardized tests and graduation rates, district data indicates that the schools with larger populations of students of color have significantly lower graduation rates and lower test scores. Notably, the singular school with students of color in the majority has a graduation rate 20% lower than the predominantly White schools.

The intervention took the form of a virtual focus group of six teachers conducted and recorded through Google Meet. Following the virtual focus groups, participants were interviewed to determine the efficacy of a focus group intervention on the presence of deficit thinking in the teacher course level recommendation process. The focus group format was chosen for this study as it allows for qualitative data to be gathered from a sample of individuals who are knowledgeable on the subject of teacher course level recommendations. Additionally, the constructivist nature of focus groups coincides with the sociocultural learning theory understanding of knowledge as being developed within a cultural context, which would provide the greatest opportunity to achieve the standard of change that is promised in critical participatory action research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The focus group met weekly over the course of three weeks on Google Meet to participate in activities and discussions in which we attempt to identify common practices within the teacher course level recommendation process and examples of deficit thinking among those practices. The first session was geared at uncovering cultural bias as it currently exists in the form of deficit thinking within the teacher course level

recommendation process. The second and third sessions focused on developing awareness of deficit thinking within the participants in an attempt to impact their course level recommendation practices. Each of the focus group meetings were audio recorded using Google Meet, and the Q-sorts, Vignettes, and written artifacts were collected and analyzed.

The first session of the virtual focus group was primarily focused on the first research question: *What are teachers' perceptions of the impact of deficit thinking in high school students' course level placement?* The session began with a discussion of the problem of practice, where I discuss data illustrating this problem and instances when this problem became clear in my professional career. I invited others to contribute anecdotes from their own professional careers with the goal of not only collecting qualitative evidence relevant to the research question, but also of establishing myself as an insider. Because participants were taken from across the school district, it is important that the participants view this study as a collaborative effort of individuals from a shared community working towards a specific goal in order to ensure that the study meets the action research goal of educating both the researcher and the participant (Herr and Anderson, 2014).

After the introduction to the study, the focus group began its first activity, a Q-sort of criteria used for teacher course level recommendations (see Appendix A). Traditionally used in psychological research, a Q-sort measures the perceptions and values of the participants but limits the number of items that may be placed into each category, allowing for more valid data than comparable Likert scales by negating various forms of response bias (Serfass & Sherman, 2013). Participants were given a list of 18

common criteria used for teacher course level recommendations and be asked to independently categorize each as either *Significant*, *Insignificant*, or *Neutral* when determining a student's class placement before working together to place all the criteria on the Q-sort chart. The Q-sort included meritocratic criteria, those that are clearly defined and measured in a standardized process across all students, as well as non-meritocratic criteria which rely more on teacher judgment and intangible standards were reflected (Bernhardt, 2014). Non-meritocratic data was also be presented in a manner that may reflect statements identified as common identifiers of deficit mindset in educators (Reed, 2020).

The second and third meetings of the virtual focus group were geared towards answering the second research question: How does a teacher's awareness of deficit thinking impact their course level recommendations? The second meeting introduced the deficit mindset theory to the focus group. Educators read the short blog post published by Dr. Sharon Edmond (2021) as a part of an e-portfolio entitled "Deficit Thinking in Education" for Northwestern University (see Appendix C). After all participants have had a chance to read the post, I asked participants to share their thoughts by posing open-ended questions such as "are there any premises in the article that you felt strongly about?" and "how relevant do you think the theory of deficit thinking is to the teacher course level recommendation process?" The questions served as jumping off points to encourage conversation about deficit thinking within the focus group in a semi structured format (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Additionally, teachers were not asked to relate deficit thinking to their practices during this time, but rather to contemplate how deficit thinking impacts education overall.

The purpose of this is to improve trustworthiness of the discussion by avoiding confirmation biases in which participants say what they believe is the socially acceptable answer as opposed to revealing their actual thoughts and beliefs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Additionally, this served as a means of protecting my insider status within the focus group by avoiding situations in which participants feel targeted or triggered by the discussion and helps to meet the process and democratic criteria of valid action research (Herr & Anderson, 2014).

Following the discussion of the article the focus group viewed three vignettes from the perspective of a teacher determining student curriculum track placements (see Appendix B). Vignettes can act as a powerful tool within action research as it allows for reflection on specific themes surrounding the problem of practice (Spalding & Phillips, 2007), particularly when combatting deficit thinking, as teachers may be reluctant to look for answers within the educational system or their own practices (Garcia & Guerra, 2004). I developed the three vignettes by drawing on my own experiences with teacher course level recommendations in what Anzul et al. (1997) refers to as a “snapshot.” After reviewing the vignettes, the focus group had a chance to discuss the vignettes and offer insights into the appropriateness of the course level recommendations presented in the snapshots.

The third and final meeting of the focus group was geared towards creating cultural awareness within the practices of the participants of the focus group. Each member of the focus group was asked to bring an internet-accessible device to take the Harvard Implicit Association Test (IAT). Established in 1998, the IAT has been used across numerous academic fields to measure the strength of association between concepts

and race. Although the IAT is not valid as a predictor of behavior, it can serve as a tool to promote reflection among its users (Nosek et al., 2007). Participants were not be asked to share the results of the Implicit Bias Test; however, they were encouraged to participate in another same semi-structured discussion with prompts such as *do you feel like the results of the Implicit Association Test were accurate?* and *do you feel like implicit bias is something you account for in the course level recommendation process?*

Before participants are invited to share their thoughts on the implicit bias test, I reminded teachers that the purpose of action research is to improve our practices as educators, and the purpose of this focus group is to examine teacher perceptions of the ways deficit thinking affects course level placement of students to gain greater insights into the causes of the overrepresentation of students of color in lower-track courses (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Additionally, the sociocultural theory of learning holds that growth first comes from interpersonal relationships with our community; therefore, I reminded teachers that although we are aware that there are numerous factors within our society that contribute to deficit thinking, the purpose of this exercise is to focus on what we can control within our own course level recommendation practices.

Finally, exit interviews were conducted virtually through Google Meet with each of the participants of the study within a week of the third focus group meeting. The purpose of these exit interviews is to establish the validity of the focus groups as a means of intervention and the reliability of the practices to replicate the same results (Leung, 2015). Additionally, the interviews served as a means to triangulate the quantitative data and identify any biases presented by the participants. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format so that each individual could relate their own perspective and state

the extent to which the intervention affected change in their practices, but also so that more defined questions could be created in the event that this study were to be replicated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Participants

The six teachers in the study work in a large suburban district outside of a major metropolitan area in the southern United States. This number of participants was selected to ensure a large enough sample to provide rich data but not so large that participation by all members would be discouraged (Masadeh, 2012). Further the chosen teachers volunteered, which suggested they were open to the possibility of changing their practices, meeting the catalytic criteria for validity in action research (Herr & Anderson, 2014).

Participants were selected using purposive sampling with limited but explicit exclusion criteria to ensure that the participants were knowledgeable about the teacher course level recommendation process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). A Google Form (see Appendix D) was sent out to all secondary education teachers in the school district providing a brief description of the study and the problem of practice and a brief questionnaire for volunteers to complete if they wish to participate in the study. This Google Form asked individuals to specify their age, years of experience, gender identity, and ethnicity. Perspective participants were excluded if they have two or fewer years of teaching experience, as it would limit their familiarity with the teacher course level recommendation process. I also believe that any unwillingness to participate in discussions would be bridged by framing the focus group as a community of educators as opposed to members of a particular demographic group. The exclusion of other

stakeholders in the community serves to preserve this connection between the group while allowing for the diversity among teachers to fulfill the democratic nature of valid action research (Herr & Anderson, 2014).

I facilitated the study as an insider collaborating with other insiders in the nature of participatory action research with the explicit goal of initiating change within the community of teachers (Herr & Anderson, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Although in some instances having the researcher facilitating the focus group may lead to bias, that was be countered with the exploratory nature of action research (Masadeh, 2012). Additionally, by framing my positionality continuously throughout the study as a desire to improve my practices and framing the nature of the focus group through the lens of the sociocultural learning theory in which individuals need to engage with members of their community to grow, I can avoid biases by demonstrating myself as an insider in the study alongside the other members of the focus group.

The differences in age and experience as well as background of the participants of the study served to fulfill the democratic nature of action research as outlined by Herr and Anderson (2014) and provide a dynamic understanding of the research questions. Our two male teachers in this focus group, Russell and Walter (all names are pseudonyms), both have over 30 years of experience and although they have taught in the same states their whole careers, Russell spent the first 10 years of his career at a private school before moving into a predominantly Black public high school, while Walter has spent over half his career teaching at the middle school level before transitioning to a predominantly Black high school. Both only transitioned to the school district that is the central focus of this study in the last three years.

Although the number of years in education is vastly different between Courtney and Kelly, they both began their teaching career in the American South West before moving to the American South East in the last five years. While Kelly spent a large portion of her 21 years teaching in a school with a large Latino and English Language Learner population, Courtney taught in a charter school in the same state that was predominantly White. Courtney also provides a unique perspective as being a comparatively new teacher, starting her 9th year of teaching in 2022, despite being over the age of 45.

Amy and Sandy were similar in that they began and continue their career relatively near the school districts they attended as teenagers, however Amy is starting her fifth-year teaching, while Sandy is beginning her 22nd year. Both provide unique life experiences to the focus group in that Sandy was raised in a predominantly Black neighborhood in the school district that is the focus of the study. Amy, while admitting that she was able to attend schools in areas that were more affluent, provided unique insights as a member of the LGBTQ+ community.

Treatment, Processing, and Analysis of Data

The qualitative data gathered from the focus groups and the interviews were coded in the content analysis format as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2015) in which the data is presented in relation to the theoretical frameworks before more specific themes are identified and applied to the research questions (2015). The transcripts and artifacts from each of the three sessions of the focus group was coded individually prior to the next meeting of the focus group in order to establish relevant themes (Barbour, 2021). The transcripts and the artifacts were then be analyzed together to develop

categories and establish analytical coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Analytical coding is preferred over quantitative coding in this study because it provides more latitude to analyze the interaction between participants (Catterall & Maclaren, 1997).

This process was repeated following the individual interviews as well, with each interview being coded individually and then analytically coded together. To address the research questions, the categories constructed from the focus groups and the interviews were compared to identify a base level of deficit thinking and then evaluate the extent to which change occurred as a result of the focus group discussions. The perceptions of the focus group displayed in the first meeting helped to illustrate the extent to which deficit thinking is prevalent within the system of teacher course level recommendations, and the reflections found in the individual interviews provide insight into the extent to which the intervention was effective changing their perception of teacher course level recommendations as a vehicle for educational inequity among students of color. Coding in this manner not only helps to reach the point of saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), but also helps to establish the validity outcomes of action research, specifically the achievement of action-oriented outcomes, the generation of new knowledge, and the education of the participants and the practitioner (Herr & Anderson, 2014).

To protect the sensitive information of all participants, I used pseudonyms for all members of the focus group when transcribing the recordings. Additionally, I redacted all instances where schools, districts, or locations from the transcripts. It is worth noting that the problem of over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes is universal enough to prevent the identification of participants and still allow for process validity and provide results that are relevant to the local setting.

Summary

Chapter three began with a brief overview of the problem of practice regarding the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes, followed by a discussion of how the theoretical frameworks of deficit thinking and sociocultural learning directly related to the two research questions. Following this introduction, the research design and intervention were outlined, detailing the three meetings of the focus group and the interviews that follow the intervention. The research procedure is emphasized throughout this section by explicitly stating which aspects of the research questions were addressed by which tools and materials in the various phases of the lesson plan and the rationale for each. Next the participants for the intervention are discussed, including the criteria used to qualify each of them. Finally, the methods and procedures for coding the qualitative data found in the transcripts and artifacts developed during the intervention.

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

Despite the effort by the federal and local governments to address issues of equity in education, many problems still exist, including the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes. Being placed in lower-tracked classes can disadvantage students by preventing them from accessing, among other things, a more rigorous curriculum and opportunities to receive college credit. While there are numerous factors that contribute to student track placement, this study focused on teacher course level recommendations, utilizing two research questions:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of the impact of deficit thinking in high school students' course level placement?
2. How does a teacher's awareness of deficit thinking impact their course level recommendations?

The intervention used to answer the research question took place in the form of a virtual focus group of six teachers from a large, diverse, and very successful school district in the southern United States. The focus group format was chosen to encourage growth among the participants in the manner outlined by the sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978) as the teachers reflected on the nature of deficit thinking within their own practices and the broader. Sociocultural learning theory combined with the concept of deficit thinking served as the theoretical framework of the study.

Qualitative data was gathered from three virtual focus group meetings and a series of exit interviews with each of the participants. During these meetings the focus group, which was made up of six secondary level educators from different backgrounds who teach different subjects, were asked to participate in various activities designed to promote reflection and discussion of their course level recommendation practices via Google Meet. The qualitative data from each of these sections were gathered from notes taken during the interviews, as well as transcripts and artifacts recovered directly from each session.

This data was then analyzed in the order they were received in the focus groups and interviews. The transcripts, notes, and artifacts from each meeting were printed and annotated by hand and then condensed into a thick description, which was valuable in aligning the data with the theoretical frameworks, particularly as it applied to less tangible concepts such as implicit deficit thinking. The data was then coded analytically to find comments and notes that relate to the theoretical frameworks of deficit thinking and sociocultural learning (Richards, 2015). These codes were then combined to establish major recurring themes that aligned with the research questions. The four major themes revealed in the data were recognition of institutional deficiencies, deficit thinking, and the extent to which teachers viewed course level recommendations as a cause of the over-representations.

Chapter Four will present the data through the three themes derived from analyzing the qualitative data gathered from this study. Each theme will begin with a short discussion of the initial codes that were combined to form those themes. Following

the identification of the three themes general findings will be outlined and discussed relative to how they interact in context with one another. Finally, this chapter will conclude with the application of the data to the research questions.

Recognition of Institutional Deficiencies

While all the participants expressed that they had not encountered the idea of deficit thinking in their careers, most of the participants exhibited an implicit understanding of the tenets of deficit thinking by highlighting instances where the educational institution had historically failed to support students of color. The theme of recognition of institutional deficiencies was originally coded as three concepts: *faulting schools*, *faulting policies*, or *historical causes*. Each of these concepts was expressed at all three focus groups meetings and referenced at least once by a majority of the focus group participants. These early codes were then combined to create the theme of *recognition of institutional deficiencies* to better align with the research questions. Combining these codes into one theme provided me with a strong sense of the participants' understanding of concepts of deficit thinking prior to the intervention, which gave insights into how the teachers viewed the impact of deficit thinking in student course level placement. Additionally, understanding the participants innate knowledge of deficit thinking gave a consistent means of tracking participants' changing attitudes towards the course recommendation process as a result of the introduction of the idea of deficit thinking during the focus group.

At the beginning of session one, Walter, who has been teaching social studies in South Carolina for 30 years in both high and middle school, explained the historical roots

of tracking as a means of continuing segregated school practices following the integration of schools in the 1960's:

I mean. . . the creation of tracking, I think, is very much in a sinister way designed to create, you know, those separations of racial groups. But . . . if your district suddenly . . . had that demographic shift over time where 70%, maybe even higher, of the district is now African-American . . . at the end. . . I mean tracking. . . it loses that sinister quality.

Even though Walter claimed that tracking had lost its “sinister quality,” he would go on to illustrate the way that segregation through curriculum tracking is still maintained in schools that districts that predominantly serve students of color:

. . . like the magnet systems, I think, still creates that sorting of kids. I mean the program I was working with until I left [my former school] was still a predominant haven of White students that were trying to escape the rest of the student population . . . at least their parents wanted them to do that

Amy corroborated this idea when she talked about how she had recently learned about White flight and the effects on her predominantly Black school of the demographic shift of White middle-class families moving to the suburbs. Amy followed up on Walter's point with an anecdote about another teacher's conference with the parents of two White children that were failing their AP class who refused to move them into lower-tracks because they perceived the CP and Honors classes as offering a lesser education. She stated:

Apparently in schools that are predominantly of color parents, [White families] have either fled the school to find a school that is not predominantly of color, or

they put their kids [into] ... honors and AP classes because they feel like their students won't be able to learn in classes that are CP.

The participants were also critical of the failures of the educational system to support students in the modern context as well as the historical context. For example, during the second focus group session, the teachers discussed the struggles that the current 9th graders were having adjusting to the high school environment. Amy expressed that her 11th grade students had told her that “this group of 9th graders are the worst.” The participants unanimously expressed agreement through nods and quickly identified virtual learning during the coronavirus pandemic as the cause of student poor performance across the 9th grade level, claiming that students had forgone important socialization that occurs during middle school. This is seen when Courtney stated:

It all happened so fast... and without any training or guidance we were just asked to change all of our [lessons] to virtual all at once. I know I didn't do a good job... I felt like I was set up for failure.

This is one instance where the focus group was able to unanimously indict the educational system for failure of a broad group of students.

Another example came during the second focus group session when participants shared similar experiences when working with students designated as English Language Learners. Kelly, who spent much of her career working in a school with students who spoke English as a second language, was critical of the nature of formal and standardized assessments as a tool of measure student achievement, stating that students who do not score highly on standardized assessments are viewed as “... just not equipped, but they

are equipped... possibly just in different ways.” Courtney echoed frustrations surrounding struggles of the school to meet the needs of students who speak English as a second language, stating that five of her students could not speak any English, and the teachers were not notified by school counselors “until now, five weeks into the school year.” To follow up, I asked the group if they felt as though the school they worked in “did enough to support students who are English language learners” to which every teacher responded in unison either with an audible “no” or shaking their head.

The participants’ discussions of the historical roots of curriculum tracking as a means of segregation presented not only a general understanding of the institutional causes of the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes, but also the results of the deficits for students and their community. Although Walter did claim that curriculum tracking is less “insidious” in the modern context, in the discussion surrounding students designated as English language learners and students who were negatively impacted by the Covid-era lockdowns, every member of the focus group affirmed that they felt the schools they work in are not adequately meeting the needs of students. This discussion highlighted the teachers’ perceptions that the educational system can proliferate lower academic achievement in groups of students who are designated to lower-tracked classes and ultimately affect their course level placement, which is relevant to the first research question. Additionally the discussions surrounding the theme of institutional deficiencies served to build the awareness of deficit thinking indicated in the second research question through the sociocultural learning that took place through discussion within the focus groups.

Deficit Thinking

Implicit deficit thinking was originally coded through notes and transcripts as *faulting individuals* and *faulting communities*, two ideas which align clearly with the tenants of deficit thinking. Combining the original codes of *faulting individuals* and *faulting communities* into the broader terms of *deficit thinking* helped to condense the codes in a manner that more simply addressed the research questions. Focusing on deficit thinking directly coincided with language found in the research questions and therefore provided strong data to analyze the extent to which the participants perceived deficit thinking as a factor in their criteria used to recommend students for their course level track and the impact of a teacher's awareness of deficit thinking on their own course recommendation practices. This section will trace deficit thinking by viewing examples of deficit thinking that teachers identified as impactful in student course placement, such as the mindset of teachers and the socio-economic status of students, followed by the examples of how teachers displayed aspects of deficit thinking towards their students in the form of the criteria they use to recommend students for course levels, and the proclivity to blame parents and students for the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes.

Throughout the course of the focus groups and the exit interviews participants recognized numerous instances where deficit thinking was explicitly present in the course level placement of students of color into lower-tracked classes. In all three sessions the focus group recognized the impact of deficit thinking in the course level placement of students by acknowledging that there were specific populations of teachers who would place students into lower-tracks based on the color of their skin. Kelly discussed this idea

during the second session of the focus group by drawing on her professional experience working at a school with a large Spanish speaking population in Arizona and at a title one school in the southern United States:

I think it depends on the work culture of your school. My first job was at a migrant school and most of the people there were just like ‘these kids can do it -- we just like have to be flexible’... but there were some teachers that were just very... like . . . you could just see they have these preconceptions [of] these students.

In the same conversation Courtney echoed the idea that the community of educators can impact individual perceptions of students: “This wasn't addressed in the reading, but I think it is something that teachers struggle with a lot is another teacher's perception of a child you're getting that they taught before you.” Courtney illustrated an example of how a colleague’s deficit thinking could impact another teacher’s impression of a student , and that individuals need to be wary of that aspect of cultural influence. This is an example of participant recognition of the way that deficit thinking can impact student course placement even beyond the individual practices of one teacher. This idea was taken a step further on the third day of the focus group when Sandy openly expressed that there were educators who let their racial biases impact their judgment of students, and that this gave cause for members of the community to feel as though teachers were untrustworthy stewards of their children’s education:

I have had colleagues in the past who I could tell their bias . . . I could see it . . . so I think that . . . some people have [bias] . . . I have seen it, but [parents] were so biased that they believed that I was being biased because I didn't have a bias.

This acknowledgment of individual bias in teachers shows the way in which deficit thinking can impact teacher course recommendations, answering question one.

Additionally, the participants' awareness that some groups of educators lean explicitly on deficit thinking during course recommendations, and the awareness that this deficit thinking can influence other teachers' perceptions of students and the broader culture of the school speaks to research question one.

Another example of explicit deficit thinking presented itself in the perception of students' ability to achieve at higher levels based on their socio-economic status. Socio-economic status was first identified as a non-factor in the recommendation process for student course level recommendations by Sandy during the Q-sort, a sentiment to which all the participants quickly and unanimously agreed. However, deficit thinking became clear when participants discussed the way students' lives outside of the classroom could exclude them from higher course levels because they would not be able to complete this outside work. All teachers expressed that AP classes were significantly harder than CP classes, attributing the increased rigor to the amount of work students will need to complete outside of the classroom.

This was illustrated in the discussion of the vignettes during the second focus group session, where a point of contention emerged from my decision to place CP students into AP classes. Courtney stated that no students should move from a CP class

directly to an AP class because the course would be more “rigorous” than what they had experienced in CP classes: “It doesn’t matter how smart [the student is], if they have been in a class where they are not [penalized] for late work . . . or not asked to complete homework, they will not be ready for an AP class.” All teachers seemed to agree with this point with Kelly even stating that if these students, who were all designated as 10th graders, were placed in honors in their 11th grade year, they would still have “. . . one more year to take an AP class.” Russell built on this idea stating “that is what honors [classes] are for.”

Russell continued this reasoning when he explicitly stated the significance of what he termed as “long term parallel assignments” (assignments such as projects or reading that would need to be completed outside of the classroom) to success in the AP classroom. Russell stated that students who were not able to commit the time outside of the classroom to complete these activities were not well suited for AP classes . While this may seem as a given, Kelly expressed the deficit thinking surrounding students of lower socioeconomic class as it applies to the nature of the rigor of AP classes:

That's one thing I say to my kids when I go to recommend them for AP is “how much time do you have outside of class?” I flat out tell my kids, “Look, if you are working and you need to work . . . like . . . you're just not working for fun or whatever... you probably don't have time to take an AP class.”

Kelly did go on to acknowledge that this disadvantages students of color at a higher rate because their families may need them to work to help support the family or themselves. However she did not identify other extracurricular activities that students may be engaged

in, such as sports or school clubs, as a factor that may deter a student from being recommended for AP classes. This emphasis on student jobs as opposed to school based extracurriculars in which AP students are frequently engaged is itself an example of deficit thinking based on socioeconomic levels. While the act of assigning homework in higher course levels is a common practice, the acknowledgement of the disproportionate need of students from a lower socioeconomic class to work and identifying this as a consequential factor in the recommendation for curriculum track level placement is an explicit example of deficit thinking in the course level placement of students.

Although the participants were clearly able to identify ways in which the institution of education had proliferated the conditions that lead to the over-representation of students of color into lower-tracked classes, they also displayed some form of deficit thinking throughout the study. However, most of this deficit thinking was implicit – that is, being expressed without the awareness of the participant. This implicit deficit thinking was presented most clearly on day one as the participants completed the Q-Sort (Figure 4.1). In this activity, the participants worked together to categorize criteria commonly taken into consideration when recommending a student for a curriculum track level as either *significant*, *neutral*, or *insignificant*. Sandy volunteered to be the participant who manipulated the virtual stimulus saying, “These are the things that I don't consider when I'm looking at it. I don't consider race, family involvement or their socioeconomic status.” The rest of the participants unanimously agreed with this characterization through head nods, and Sandy quickly adjusted the Q-sort to reflect this with no opposition from the rest of the focus group. This decisive categorization of these demographic factors as

insignificant indicates that the teachers did not perceive any of their practices regarding course level recommendations to be influenced by deficit thinking.

As the Q-sort activity continued it became clear that the participants did hold ideas consistent with deficit thinking implicitly within their course recommendation criteria. Most of the implicit deficit thinking took place surrounding the non-meritocratic criteria the teachers use to determine their recommendation for students' course level placement. Early in the discussion, Kelly openly acknowledged the impact of implicit deficit thinking on the teacher course level recommendations saying

I don't think any teacher is going to say I didn't pick this person to go to honors because of the color of their skin, but it's couched in things . . . like they are not good at standard English or their writing skill or they speak more in a dialect. It's always coded as they're deficient in some way.

However, Walter instigated the most contentious point in the Q-sort with comments about the importance of student engagement in the class.

Walter wanted student engagement to be represented in the most significant section stating, "I just think that that captures another potential group in terms of kids who you want to put in [higher-tracked classes] as much as kids who do phenomenal work." Russell, however, advocated for moving engagement into the neutral or less significant range, responding by drawing on anecdotes of "kids that sat there like bumps and passed the exam." Kelly also supported this by characterizing herself in high school as "super introverted and shy, but I was the valedictorian." Ultimately the group decided to move *engagement in class* down one category on the Q-Sort, still maintaining it as a

significant criterion, but not as significant as *work ethic* and *reading/writing ability*. It is important to note that these criteria were identified as important despite Kelly's acknowledgement of deficit thinking in course recommendations.

This designation of *reading/writing ability* as a significant factor in determining a student's course level recommendation despite Kelly's acknowledgement to the group that this criteria often disadvantages students of color illustrates implicit deficit thinking. Determining this criteria as most significant displays implicit deficit thinking by prioritizing the students who are more prepared to succeed on standardized tests for higher course levels than a student who is engaged and active in class but who may not have been traditionally identified. This uniformity of decision suggests deficit thinking among the focus group; however the way that the focus group was quick to identify race and socioeconomic status as non-factors shows that the participants were not aware of the implicit deficit thinking they displayed, which suggests they did not perceive it as impactful in the course recommendation process.

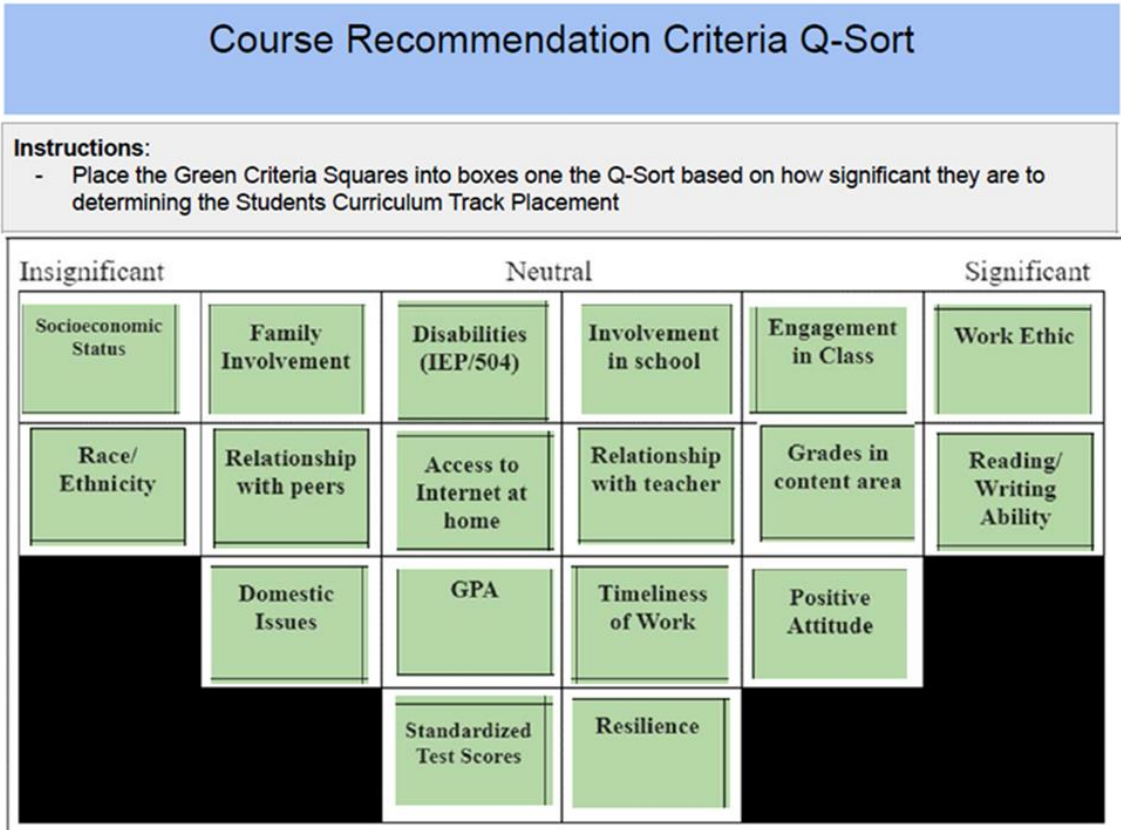


Figure 4.1: Completed Course Recommendation Criteria Q-Sort

Another common form of implicit deficit thinking among the participants throughout the study was the inclination to blame the parents of the students for the performance of the students. For example, Russell was very adamant about this point, claiming that parents at private schools were more invested in their children's success than parents at public schools: “These were private school kids, and their parents supported every single assignment that I gave them and made sure that they were getting their money's worth.” His comment carried implications of the efficacy of parents in lower socio-economic classes, which was further evidenced as he went on to describe interactions with parents at his current public school: “I was calling parents and [they would respond] ‘okay. I'll text him and tell him to turn his test in from last week.’”

Russell, visibly exacerbated when discussing the lack of parent involvement then proceeded to joke that parents needed to employ corporal punishment to discipline children: “It’s like, Woman, beat that child!” Although this was delivered as a joke, only one participant laughed while the two others nodded in solemn agreement with the sentiment. The acceptance of this joke by the participants is evidence of deficit thinking that was not perceived by the members of the focus group, illustrating that the focus group perceived that parents of lower socio-economic levels fail to go to the necessary lengths to discipline their children in a manner that would ensure academic success, ultimately placing the blame for students’ low academic performance at the feet of the parents.

Another example of explicit deficit thinking was the blaming of students for the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes. Courtney identified the presence of deficit thinking in “teenage culture” in which she described teenagers having a “deficit view of themselves.” Courtney stated that this culture resulted in students displaying apathy towards their classwork and “a reliance on their phones,” and claimed that students had already decided that they did not have the skills to be successful in her class before they really made any effort at mastering the content. In a similar way that the participants identified the creeping effects of deficit thinking in teachers, Sandy addressed how negative behavior of individual students can impact their peers “... what I’ve always said is, you have to watch who your children sit beside {and] who their influences are.” When I asked the group if this feeling was a shared feeling, all nodded in agreement, with Amy expressing that her 11th grade students had told her that “this group of 9th graders is the worst,” referring to the in class disruptions that many of her juniors

had witnessed their younger peers cause in and outside of class. The focus group agreed with this sentiment, with Courtney adding “This year has been so hard. I was... googling new jobs in September.” Despite acknowledging the institutional failures of schools to meet the social needs of these students, the characterization of “teenage culture” placed the culpability for low academic performance on the students. This example of explicit deficit thinking from the participants gives insights into the way that teachers often display deficit thinking in the course recommendation process while still perceiving that there is not deficit thinking in their practices.

Significance of Course Recommendations

Ultimately only one teacher indicated in exit interviews that knowledge of deficit thinking from this study would create change in their course level recommendation practices. While this may not seem surprising after the analysis of implicit and explicit deficit thinking, it was surprising to hear that the primary reason that teachers would not change their practices is due to the feeling that course recommendations do not serve as a significant cause of the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes, particularly in secondary education.

The theme of *significance of course recommendations* was originally identified as a part of the first theme discussed, *institutional deficiencies*, but was later singled out as an individual theme because of the consistency that it appeared in discussion across all three sessions of focus groups and the exit interviews through codes like *administration pressure* and *parental override*. Initially these were coded throughout the notes and transcripts by highlighting any time the participants explicitly mentioned course

recommendations. It became clear upon the review that a significant number of the excerpts coded this way were instances where the participants expressed that teacher course recommendations were a relatively insignificant measure for determining student curriculum level placement. This would be a key factor in determining the teachers' perceptions of the impact of deficit thinking in student course level placement and the extent to which awareness of deficit thinking impacts teachers course level recommendations.

In Walter's exit interview he stated that while he felt the focus groups were a worthwhile exercise, he believed that the "cake was already baked" by the time the students had reached secondary education, stating that their academic trajectories were essentially fixed due to their paths set in elementary and middle levels, going on to say "I just think that there's so much of that that's out of our hands. I don't think anybody's making any intentional decision other than what the system is already created for us." This is a significant data point from Walter as he was previously a middle school teacher and therefor has extra insights into how course recommendations at the middle school level impact students' academic trajectory. Kelly confirmed this idea by stating that she had noticed at her previous school that the students she taught in CP as freshmen were the same ones she was teaching in CP as seniors "and they were doing about the same amount of work" she added offhandedly. This was met with a laugh and a sign of acknowledgement from the group.

Additionally, Russell would also claim in his exit interviews that the differentiation that is offered in CP level classes is beneficial to the students that are placed in that level and that he did not feel the different tracks provided a truly distinct

difference in levels of education, stating “if you have the kids placed at the level they are supposed to be at. . . there really isn’t that much [difference] in what they are learning.” This is interesting when contextualized with the conversation surrounding the three vignettes on day two in which all participants, Russell included, agreed that there was a significant difference in the CP, Honors, and AP level courses. When asked about this Russell elaborated that at the time he had been referring to the rigor of the class and not necessarily the material presented.

This point had been stated on the first day by Sandy, who claimed that the problem of practice may not be worth studying because “we are told. . . in our professional developments that differentiation is designed to meet students where they are at.” This statement builds on Russell’s characterization of the system of course level tracking as generally fair by identifying differentiation to ensure that all students have their needs met by educators. These two examples of the participants view of the impact of course recommendations in middle school and the positive impact of differentiation illustrate the apathetic duality of teacher sentiment towards curriculum tracking steeped in deficit thinking: either the system is too large to change, or the system is fine and generally beneficial to students in its current form. This is an important concept to understand when attempting to understand why awareness of deficit thinking did not impact participant course level recommendations.

Participants also expressed that their input into student course recommendations was not a key factor in student curriculum track placement because parents could override their recommendations. Amy recounted a story of the teacher across the hall who had a conference with the parents of two White children who were failing their AP

class, and the parents of both children refused to move them into lower-tracks because they perceived the CP and Honors classes as offering a lesser education. Russell verified this point shortly afterwards, saying:

I've had the same situation but it was Black parents who wanted their children to be in a class that they know they can't handle but they just want them in there for the exposure. They're fine with a D grade, they're fine with them not passing the AP exam.

These two anecdotes were well received by the rest of the focus group, who expressed through affirmative body language that they sympathized with the experience. Courtney would build on this idea by expressing her “frustration” that students were placed in curriculum tracks that contradicted the teacher course recommendation. These anecdotes also provide examples of the sentiment that teacher course recommendations are ultimately ineffective on students’ outcomes because parents ultimately have the final say in what curriculum track their students are placed in regardless of teacher input.

The focus group also indicated that pressure from administration served as a limiting factor in changing practices of teacher course level recommendations. Courtney, the only participant who stated that the knowledge of deficit thinking would impact their course level recommendation practices, also stated that pressure from administration to maintain high pass rates on AP tests would still impact her judgment for teacher course level recommendations. Walter and Kelly also claimed that the conversation was a worthwhile activity, but cited the demands of administration as a driving factor as to why their course recommendation practices would not change. This is a thought that Kelly

emphasized in the first focus group session as participants were speculating about the causes of the over-representation for students of color in lower-tracked classes:

I do think we pay attention to what the [administration] is asking us to do. If you're an AP teacher, you definitely want students in your class that are going to have success, or [you will end up] talking to an [assistant principle] about why students are not being successful.

Overall, when evaluating the extent to which awareness of deficit thinking would impact practices in teacher course recommendations among participants, understanding teachers' perceptions of the lack of significance their recommendations have on determining student course level placements is central to developing a picture of the effectiveness of the intervention. The participants generally expressed that broader institutional factors, such as prior course placement in elementary and middle school levels or the unbalanced influence of parent and administration input outweighed the recommendation of the teachers in determining student track level.

This disparity in the perceived impact of teacher course recommendations as a tool for determining student course level placement resulted in a reluctance by teachers to examine their own course recommendation practices, limiting the effectiveness of the intervention to cause change regardless of the participants awareness of deficit thinking. Additionally, this theme is significant to answering research question one as it shows that regardless of the deficit thinking present in the teacher course recommendation process, teacher course recommendations themselves are not impactful in students' course level placement.

General Findings

After compiling the transcripts and notes to form a thick description the data was coded analytically by identifying initial codes that aligned with the theoretical frameworks of the study. These initial codes were then combined into three themes that were relevant to the main ideas of the research questions. Those themes are recognition of institutional deficiencies, deficit thinking, and the significance of course recommendations. The data gathered from the analysis of these themes were then used to answer the research questions in order to provide greater insight into the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes.

The focus group identified institutional factors that impacted student academic achievement, such as historical trends of discrimination in course level placement, lack of support when addressing the needs of students designated as English language learners, and the manner in which specific school policies impacted the academic outcomes of students. The participants also acknowledged that deficit thinking is present in the criteria other teachers used in determining a student's course level recommendation, and this deficit thinking can influence other teachers and in part create a school culture that carries a deficit view of students of color. Additionally, the focus group identified ways in which practices by teachers of higher-tracked classes can disadvantage students of lower socioeconomic status.

Although the participants perceived deficit thinking as an impactful factor in the course level placement of students of color, they did not identify examples of deficit thinking in their own practices. Implicit deficit thinking, in which teachers in general

displayed aspects of deficit thinking towards students without acknowledging the institutional factors that contribute to these student behaviors or outcomes, took the form of basing a student's course level recommendation on non-meritocratic criteria or criteria that explicitly benefited students who achieved higher scores on standardized tests. Furthermore, teachers would display signs of deficit thinking towards communities of students and parents by blaming these stakeholders for the academic outcomes of the students.

While participants were able to identify significant sources of deficit thinking that impacted students course level placement and even displayed aspect of deficit thinking in themselves that they did not recognize, they generally felt that teacher course level recommendations were not a significant factor in determining the course level placement of students. The participants cited the ability of parents to override the teachers course recommendation as primary evidence that the system of course recommendations was not an impactful factor in determining a student's curriculum level. Additionally, participants stated that pressure from administration to achieve the higher test scores impacted their decision to place certain students into AP classes because these test scores would be used to judge the effectiveness of the school as a whole.

Analysis of Data Based on Research Question

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the causes of the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes by analyzing the way teachers perceived the impact of deficit thinking on course recommendations. This section is dedicated to connect the themes developed from the data to the research questions. This process will

provide greater insights into the nature of teacher course recommendations as a cause of the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes.

1. What are teachers' perceptions of the impact of deficit thinking in high school students' course level placement?

Teachers perceive that deficit thinking does impact students' course level placement. This is evident when analyzing the participants' awareness of institutional deficiencies that lead to disparities in student achievement. All participants acknowledged that the educational system did not meet the needs of all students and identified English language learners, a group that is less than 2% White according to the National Center of Education Statistics, as a group that is particularly underserved. Additionally, the teachers acknowledged that there were common practices of higher course level classes that disadvantaged students of lower socio-economic status, such as homework requirements. The teachers acknowledged that there were teachers whose deficit thinking did impact their teacher course recommendations, and even went as far as to acknowledge that deficit thinking held by individual teachers could impact the course recommendations of other teachers and the overall culture of the school.

All participants stated that deficit thinking was prominent among some other teachers and did not perceive deficit thinking as impactful in their own teacher course recommendation practices. Despite this perception, deficit thinking did appear in the practices of the teachers in this focus group in ways that they did not perceive. Implicit deficit thinking was prominent in the criteria the participants agreed upon as most significant in determining a student's course level recommendation, some of which were meritocratic, which are problematic because they give broad range for the teacher to

interpret the actions of the student. Even in instances where meritocratic criteria were identified as significant, the meritocratic criteria selected by the participants prioritized students who were perceived as likely to be successful on standardized tests over criteria that would seek to identify students who were not traditionally represented in higher course levels. Furthermore, the participants would often identify deficiencies in the parents and the culture of the students as reasons for the over presentation of students of color in lower-tracked classes.

2. How does a teacher's awareness of deficit thinking impact their course level recommendations?

The data from this focus group reveals that teacher awareness of deficit thinking does not impact their course recommendations. Regardless of the level of understanding of deficit thinking displayed by the participants, only 1 of the 6 expressed that their expanded knowledge of deficit thinking would change their practices of course level recommendations. Even after the introduction of the theory of deficit thinking to the focus group, most were unwilling to critically analyze their practices regarding course level recommendations for aspects of deficit thinking. This was due in large part to the commonly held perception among participants that their course recommendations do not carry significant weight in determining a student's course level placement.

While some participant acknowledged that academic tracking prior to secondary education had already sorted students who were perceived to be less academically capable into lower-tracked classes, the participants were much more likely to identify parents as the majority factor in determining what course level students were placed in either through negatively impacting their child or directly appealing to administration to

have their child placed in a curriculum track of the parent's choosing. Additionally, the participants felt as though administration expected them to place students who were more likely to succeed on high stakes tests into higher course levels and discouraged placement in higher-tracks of students whom they perceived were unlikely to do well on standardized tests, which could reflect negatively on the school. This belief that teacher course level recommendations are not valued as a primary tool for determining a student's course track placement prevents a teacher's awareness of deficit thinking from leading to change in their course recommendation practices.

Summary

In summation, the qualitative data gathered from the focus group meetings definitively answered the research questions. The participants perceived deficit thinking to be impactful in the course level placement of students. Historical legacies of discrimination and failures to meet the needs of some groups of students were identified as impactful factors in determining a student's course level placement. Participants also identified the explicit deficit thinking in other teachers as well as common practices found in higher-tracked classes as barriers to students of color and students of lower socio-economic status.

Additionally, the participants implicitly displayed deficit thinking in their own practices that would impact the criteria they use to recommend students for course levels. This included the significance of non-meritocratic data that could be interpreted differently by each teacher, and the inclination to prioritize students who were perceived to achieve higher scores on high stakes test over students who may not traditionally be

identified for higher course levels. In addition to this, teachers tended to blame parents and the culture of the students for the lower academic achievement of students of color and their lower representation in higher-tracked courses.

While teachers were able to identify numerous examples of deficit thinking that contribute to the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes, they also stated that these were not particularly impactful in student course placement. This was due to the perception by the focus group participants that teacher course recommendations were not as significant in the course recommendation process as other factors, including parent input. Additionally, the participants stated that an emphasis by administration to place students who were more likely to succeed on standardized tests into high stakes classes influenced their willingness to recommend students were not easily identifiable as ones who would be successful in higher course levels into those courses.

In Chapter 5, these study results will be discussed in context with other literature surrounding teacher course recommendations. I will then draw the major conclusions found in this study regarding the nature of deficit thinking as it relates to the over-representation of students of color in lower tracked classes. Additionally, the chapter will provide recommendations for how the insights granted by that participants can be applied in schools and by teacher individually.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine teacher perceptions of the ways deficit thinking affects course level placement of students to gain greater insights into the causes of the over-representation of students of color in lower-track courses. To more concisely evaluate this issue, two primary research questions were chosen to guide this study:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of the impact of deficit thinking in high school students' course level placement?
2. How does a teacher's awareness of deficit thinking impact their course level recommendations?

To answer these questions a group of 6 educators volunteered to participate in a focus group in which they completed various individual and group activities and discussions to promote critical reflection of their own teacher course level recommendation practices. The findings from the intervention show that deficit thinking is present both implicitly and explicitly in the criteria teachers use for course level recommendations. However, increasing teacher awareness of deficit thinking did not affectively change teacher course level practices.

This chapter will provide a general discussion of the findings of the study. It will begin by placing the results of the study in context of the other research previously outlined in chapter two. This is done to gain a better understanding of how this study

contributes to the broader discussion surrounding course recommendations as a facilitator of the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes. This discussion will be followed by recommendations about how the study's conclusions might inform school practices, as well as a plan to implement these recommendations. This chapter will then provide a reflection on academic research and how the findings of this study and the process of creating this dissertation has shaped my teaching and worldview. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a discussion of the limitation of this research, as well as recommendations for future research based on the findings of this study.

Results in Context with Literature

Overall, the results of this study coincide well with the literature discussed in Chapter Two. For example, this study found that the participants of the focus group already carried with them some knowledge of deficit thinking, such as primarily blaming the individual and the community for the broader social failings that contribute to the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes (Davis & Museus, 2019). Although the deficit thinking the participants expressed was typically implicit and always without the awareness of the participant, this is consistent with findings by Strack et al. (2020) that show teachers carry just as much implicit bias as other members of society.

Additionally, the participants confirmed the inequities of curriculum tracking by explicitly stating that the expectations and rigor of CP classes are dramatically different than that of an Honors or AP class. This coincides with the literature that critiques curriculum tracking in support of the de-tracking movement which held that differences

in rigor and scope found in higher course level classes creates a reinforcing causal loop that perpetuates students who are placed in lower-tracked courses remaining in lower course levels (Kelly, 2009; Oakes, 2005; Wantanabe, 2008). The research by these authors also reinforces the point made by some of the participants that tracking at the middle school level can affect student course level placement at the high school level.

The results of this study did deviate from the research regarding criteria teachers use for course level recommendations. According to Bernhardt (2014), implicit bias can be particularly problematic in the course recommendation process when considering the prevalence of non-meritocratic criteria because non-meritocratic criteria are less standardized than meritocratic criteria; consequently, it can be evaluated differently by each educator. Indeed, the results of this study found that implicit deficit thinking in non-meritocratic data was a very powerful, and problematic, factor when recommending students' course level placement. However, while the participants were debating the significance of various criteria used to determine a students' course level recommendation, there was little discussion about what each of these non-meritocratic criteria looked like in real life scenarios. This could indicate that teachers generally believed they have a shared vision of what each of these non-meritocratic criteria looked like.

While the unspoken uniform understanding of these criteria runs contrary to Bernhardt's point of inconsistency in the way teachers evaluate non-meritocratic criteria, it does point to the significance of problematic cultural norms (Campbell, 2012; McCardle, 2020) that the educational institution was founded in the course level placement of students. Additionally, the standardized and easily measured meritocratic

criteria that Bernhardt recommends using in place of the non-meritocratic standards, such as reading and writing ability, serve to promote the students who would be more successful on standardized tests to higher-tracked classes as opposed to criteria that would attempt to be more inclusive of students who are not traditionally identified for higher course level classes. Basing student course placement on their perceived ability to perform well on high stakes testing, which has become a prominent means of judging the effectiveness of schools (Dworkin, 2005), is problematic because historically standardized testing was created to maintain segregation following the integration of schools following the civil rights era (Rosales, 2018). This shows that even in instances where teachers do not believe themselves to be influenced by deficit thinking, as was the case with the participants of the focus group, the cultural norms that are associated with the historical roots of standardized testing can disadvantage students of color in the course recommendation process.

In addition to non-meritocratic criteria, Bernhardt (2014) also identifies meritocratic criteria for course recommendations as criteria that are clearly defined and standardized. Although Bernhardt recommends leaning more on meritocratic criteria to make course recommendations, this study found that meritocratic standards can also exacerbate deficit thinking in teacher course level recommendations. While meritocratic data can be viewed as a more egalitarian way to determine students' curriculum level, deficiencies in the way schools meet the needs of some student populations can serve to ensure that these students never have an opportunity to access and receive the benefits of higher-level courses (Dworkin, 2005; Hanover Research Institute, 2015). Teachers are just as likely as other members of society to carry implicit biases and those biases can

impact the rate to which teachers recommend students of color for higher course levels (McCardle, 2020; Strack et al., 2020). The participants of this study were aware of the deficiencies in the system and therefor characterized themselves as less likely to lean on deficit thinking in their evaluation of student course level placement.

The data regarding the extent to which an awareness of deficit thinking impacts teacher course level recommendation as presented in research question two aligned well with the previous work on the effectiveness of anti-racist interventions. Lai et al. (2016) established that while some racial bias interventions have short term effects, they rarely persist over time. Vuletich and Payne (2019) revisit this data finding that over time the environment erodes the positive effects of anti-bias interventions. The discussions of the focus group illustrated the nature of education as requiring teachers to constantly engage with the political and social factors in the environment that Vuletich and Payne (2019) identified as diminishing the long-term effects of anti-bias training. This is reflected as a major theme in the study: teacher course level recommendations were often overridden by the will of other stakeholder, such as parents or administration, who often judge the success of schools based on the scores of high stakes tests (Dworkin, 2005). In conjunction with Vuletich and Payne's (2019) findings, any short-term or long-term effects to be gained from an intervention where teachers are asked to critically analyze the extent of racial biases in their practices are immediately null when the participants feel as though their input is not valued in the decision-making process.

It is also worth noting that the deficit thinking displayed by members of the focus group were consistent with racist practices and ideas from society. DiAngelo (2018) claimed that white participants can often become uneasy or uncooperative if they are

confronted with issues of race. This point was illustrated throughout the study as participants consistently attempted to shift the focus of the conversation from race to socioeconomic status, with two participants even suggesting that the topic itself was not worth researching on the first day. Additionally, the all-white focus groups may have struggled to identify impact of the institutional racism that proliferated these problems because the participants were quick to individualize the problems caused by racism as opposed to addressing the larger cultural and institutional generators of racist thoughts and beliefs (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; DiAngelo, 2018).

While deficit thinking impacts teacher course level recommendations, much of the current literature surrounding teacher course level recommendations is viewed through implicit bias alone (McCardle, 2020; Starck et al, 2020). Even in instances where teachers are relying on meritocratic criteria for teacher courser level recommendations that are less subject to teacher discretion (Bernhardt, 2014), this study has shown that deficit thinking can still impact these criteria if the criteria are analyzed without the context of broader institutional deficiencies. This study also concluded that teachers are less likely to critically reflect on their own course level recommendation practices as a cause of the over-representation of students in lower-tracked classes because they do not feel as though their recommendations are valued within the course level placement process. This is due in part to the emphasis placed on high stakes testing by other stakeholders (Dworkin, 2005). Ultimately placing the teacher in this environment where other stakeholders' values and discretions carry more weight than the teacher recommendations ensured that there was no long-term or short-term change in teacher

course recommendation practices from an increased awareness of deficit thinking (Vuletich and Payne, 2019).

In conclusion, this study showed that teachers were able to identify examples of deficit thinking that impacted the course level recommendations of students and ultimately contributed to the over-representation of students of color in lower tracked classes. This deficit thinking took the form of broader institutional failings to serve the needs of students of color, as well as the implicit biases of individual teachers that can proliferate deficit thinking among teachers and within a school culture. Additionally, commonly held practices of higher-level courses often disadvantage students of lower socioeconomic status.

This study also found that although teachers can identify examples of deficit thinking that impacts student course level placement, they did not perceive the deficit thinking in their own practices. The participants implicitly displayed deficit thinking by prioritizing criteria that identified students who would be more successful in their recommendations for higher course level classes over the criteria that would seek to include more students who are capable, but not traditionally identified for higher tracked classes. Furthermore, teachers would tend to blame parents and the culture of the students for the disparity in the over-representation of students of color in lower tracked classes. Teachers also deflected blame from their course recommendation practices by stating that ultimately course recommendations were not a significant factor in the course level placement of students, claiming parental preference and pressures from administration are more impactful in determining student course placement.

Practice Recommendation

The recommendation I am prepared to make is the development of professional learning communities of teachers and administrators to begin a dialogue surrounding deficit thinking in the course recommendation process for students. One nuance that became clear throughout the focus group was that the participants did display aspects of deficit thinking and the participants very clearly indicated that communities of educators can also be a conduit for the proliferation of deficit thinking within a school, thus contributing to the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes.

Professional learning communities would offer a platform for teachers and administrators to examine deficit thinking and biases affecting course placement and create opportunities for teachers to reflect on their instruction and develop practices that make higher-tracked classes more academically accessible to students of diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. To address teacher perceptions that their course level recommendations are not a critical factor in determining student course level placement, the professional learning communities should create clear expectations for each given course level and specific guidelines for advancing students to a higher course level.

Development of these expectations and guidelines would support administration in communicating with parents about the differences among course levels and reasons for student placement at a particular level. Empowering teachers in the course level recommendation process is the first step in asking teachers to critically analyze and address the deficit thinking in their own course recommendation practices.

Implementation Plan

To implement the findings of this study I will first share the results of this study with my school administration. With their permission, I would like to begin implementing the findings from the research at the high school for which I teach, as opposed to the district wide scope for which this study was conducted. Initially I would share my data from this study with my school administration and discuss the nature of course level recommendations from their perspective, particularly referring to the dynamic between teacher recommendations and parental requests, and what would be needed to ensure that teacher course recommendations are not trumped by parental requests.

After receiving their approval, I would begin to share the data from this study and my recommendations with members of my department to gauge interest in developing professional learning communities to participate in activities and discussions similar to the ones from this study. Initially these professional learning communities, made up of teachers who work at varying course levels, will focus on setting clearly defined criteria for teacher course-level recommendations. These criteria will then be critically analyzed to address deficit thinking in the participants and encourage teachers to consider higher placements for students of color who may not have been traditionally recommended for higher-tracked classes.

These criteria will then be passed along to administration to provide guidance to parents as to what entrance criteria and the expectation would be for each course level. Additionally, these recommendations will be shared with students so that they may be

made aware of what they need to accomplish to move to a higher curriculum track, and shared with middle school teachers so that they may be made aware of the expectations of students moving to high school. To insure equity among all students, the professional learning communities could also address the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes through analysis of their course recommendation data. The guidelines produced by the focus groups could then be viewed and commented on by other stakeholders that have are involved in the course recommendation process, particularly guidance councilors and administration.

After fine-tuning the process in my own school, I would then adapt these professional learning communities to take the form of a professional development, in which members of other school communities could work together to establish clear guidelines for the criteria that qualify students for higher course levels and expectations within that course level. Following numerous sessions of this professional development at various schools, I would gather the teacher recommendation data from each district where it was applicable and available to quantify the results of this system in an attempt to determine the impact of this program on the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes. This data would greatly contribute to the discourse surrounding the social justice issues regarding course level tracking.

Reflection on Action Research

Conducting this study has helped me grow exponentially as a professional in the way that I view my colleagues, students, and the system of education as a whole. When initially starting this project, I assumed that other teachers would hear about deficit

thinking and immediately begin to reevaluate and change their practices. I was stunned at the exit interviews when all but one of the participants told me definitively that their practices towards teacher course recommendations would not change. However, in hindsight, it is clear that expecting individuals to change their practices in hopes of igniting reform in the system is antithetical to the theoretical framework of this study. As the participants pointed out throughout the study, deficit thinking is prevalent in most communities and most people within our society, and the sociocultural learning theory holds that our learning is shaped by the members of this community.

Upon realizing this it became very easy for me personally to reevaluate my teaching practices in hopes of creating more accessible higher-tracked classes that more students find them attainable. Incorporating Honors and AP level thinking skills into my CP classes and adjusting my materials and questioning to be accessible to all students regardless of their background or ability level has allowed me to have greater insight into what my students are capable of and has given me the opportunity to engage students who have not been traditionally active in social studies classes. Ultimately, I recognize that this has been an experience that will shape me into a better educator for my students and a valuable asset for my professional community. For future implementation I plan to share my lesson plans and materials in hopes that other teachers will also work to make higher-tracked classes more accessible to students of color who are not traditionally considered to meet the non-meritocratic standards that have prevented them from being placed in these classes before.

I started off the process of this dissertation as a nice, colorblind educator, believing that if I just treated all of my students the same that they would all be able to

achieve under my tutelage. However after critically engaging in the dialogues surrounding inequities in education it became very clear to me that treating everyone equal was not going to help my students who were in the most need. Additionally, upon conducting my research with teachers it became very clear that even those with the best of intentions can be creating inequitable outcomes and even defend the system that so clearly disadvantages the most marginalized people all in the name of preserving a traditional order. Throughout this study my positionality has shifted dramatically, from being one of a number of teachers who supported the status quo at the expense of students and communities of color, to being an advocate for these communities and a teacher who is highly skeptical of the status quo and the institutions that preserve it.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study was the timeframe. With more time devoted to this study, there could have been more focus group sessions and a larger number of focus groups to reach a greater level of saturation of the qualitative data. Additionally, the timeframe of this study contributed to scheduling conflicts of the participants. On the second and third meeting, two teachers were missing each time with no teacher missing more than one day in total. A longer timeframe would have allowed more flexibility in scheduling that ultimately could have created a more complete experience of the participants and resulted in greater efficacy of the intervention.

Another limitation of the study was racial homogeneity of the participants. While the participants generally represent the demographics of an average teacher in the United States where the population of teachers is 80% White females, educators from different

racial and ethnic backgrounds could have provided greater insights into the problem of practice. Since this focus group was formed by participants who volunteered, there was not the opportunity to include the perspectives from different racial groups, which would prove insightful as the problem of practice deals specifically with students of color. Additionally, having participants discuss the issue of over-representation of students of color with members of the communities of color may have had a greater impact on the results of the intervention.

Future Research

Diversification of the participants would be the next step to furthering research on this study. For future research it would be worthwhile to conduct this study with focus groups of heterogeneous groups and homogenous groups of different demographics to identify the significance of the demographics of the teachers as a factor in studying the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes by comparing the results of different focus groups. Additionally, it would be beneficial to conduct focus groups with a variety of stakeholders, such as parents, administrators, students, and lawmakers. Creating focus groups of varying demographics and relations to the education system would not only provide greater insight into the problem of practice but could also lead to more change in the practices regarding course level placement and recommendations from parents, students, teachers, and administration.

Future research should also be conducted with middle school educators as well. A key finding in this study is the perception of teacher course recommendations as a less impactful tool in determining a student's academic trajectory at the high school level in

part because these students had already been placed into their tracks before they reached secondary education. Conducting this focus group at the middle level could have a greater impact in ensuring that students are not caught in the reciprocal cycle of low achievement perpetuated by lower-tracked classes. Additionally, it would be worth while to conduct the focus groups with a mixture of high school and middle school teachers so that the participants may be more aware of the rigor and expectations at each level and could therefore have a more complete picture of why the students were placed into a specific course level.

If this study were to be replicated with teachers in secondary education, it would also be worth viewing the study through the theoretical lens of internal and external locus of control. The participants of this study claimed that between the societal view of education, the culture of teenagers, and the incentives of administration that teachers seem to have little control on the outcome of students. Framing the study through the locus of control framework can grant greater insights into how work environment and professional relationships are impacting the practices of teachers and give more insight for administration to address the nature of course level recommendations as a cause of the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to analyze teacher perceptions of the impact of deficit thinking in student course level placement to derive greater insight into the causes of the over-representation of students of color in lower-tracked classes. This study found that teachers perceived deficit thinking in institutional deficiencies in meeting the needs

of students and the practices of individual teachers that disadvantaged underserved students, particularly English language learners and students of low socioeconomic status, as impactful in determining student course level placement. Additionally, this study identified ways in which teacher displayed deficit thinking implicitly in their recommendations, which often favored students who were perceived to be more likely to perform well on standardized tests, as impactful in students course level placement. Additionally, implicit bias from the participants was shown in the form of blaming parents and the student body for the low achievement of students in lower-tracked classes. Neither of these two forms of implicit deficit thinking was identified by the participants.

This study also found that while teachers are aware that deficit thinking is impactful in determining which course level students are placed into, simply making teachers aware of deficit thinking is not enough to change teacher practices. This is due to the teachers' perception that the system of course recommendations for student course level was not offset by the ability of parents to override the recommendation of the teachers and the pressure from administration to recommend students who will most likely to succeed on the standardized tests for AP classes as opposed to students who may not traditionally be represented in higher-stakes classes. Ultimately, the participants felt that their course recommendations did not have a substantial bearing on the academic achievement of students.

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APPENDIX A: Q-SORT

Q-Sort					
Insignificant		Neutral		Significant	
Criteria					
Grades in content area	Relationship with teacher	Domestic Issues			
Positive Attitude	Involvement in school	Reading/Writing Ability			
Timeliness of Work	Standardized Test Scores	Relationship with peers			
Family Involvement	GPA	Resilience			
Work Ethic	Socio-economic Status	Access to Internet at home			
Engagement in Class	Disabilities (IEP/504)	Race/Ethnicity			

APPENDIX B: VIGNETTES FOR TEACHER ANALYSIS

Vignette 1

M is a female student of color student in my 10th grade CP World History Class. She is very curious about the content and is always eager to engage in class activities and discussions. Although her reading ability is on grade level her writing ability is low compared to the rest of her class. Additionally, she is a student athlete and will frequently turn in work late because of her extracurricular commitments. Ultimately, I feel it is important for students of color to have the opportunity to take higher-tracked courses, and I recommend her for AP 11th Grade History.

Vignette 2

J is a White male student in my 10th grade CP World History Class. He shows a strong aptitude for history when he chooses to participate in class, however it is not uncommon for him to sleep through class discussions or activities. Despite his lack of participation, he always scores above a 90% on his tests and turns in his work on time, although sometimes his work is rushed and low quality. I recommend J for AP 11th Grade History because I believe a more challenging class may keep him more involved.

Vignette 3

L is a female student of color in my 10th grade CP World History Class. At the beginning of the school year she was very engaged with a near perfect score in class. However by then end of the year her participation in class was very limited and she had stopped turning in assignments almost completely. Both the student and her mother were responsive to communication. They informed me the family was undergoing multiple hardships, including a change in housing, a loss in the family, and the students struggle with mental health, but assured me she would complete any missing work. Unfortunately, C finished the class with a D. I recommended C for 11th Grade AP History because of the temporary nature of the circumstances affecting her grade.

APPENDIX C: BACKGROUND READING ON DEFICIT THINKING

Is the glass half empty or half full?



When we think about children entering classrooms each day, what thoughts about them go through an educator's mind. Are children viewed walking into the classroom fully equipped with the ability to learn or are they viewed as lacking the ability to learn? The thoughts educators have about the students in their classroom can be highly beneficial or they can be extremely damaging to a child.



When educators begin to see the glass as half empty, they are demonstrating deficit thinking. Deficit thinking is the belief that some students have internal deficiencies, such as cognitive or motivational limitations that lead to school failure. Valencia (1997) believes that US educators use deficit thinking as an excuse to explain increased school failures occurring with low-income families and children of color. Deficit thinking has led to the belief that children in poverty are uneducable. This leads to tracking students into remedial courses, special education or negative school environments (Valenzuela, 1999). Once students are tracked into these systems, it is almost impossible to climb out. They become defined by a label that represents how others see them and how they begin to see themselves.

National assessments, grades, and other assessment tools have supported deficit thinking by showing that children of poverty and children of color often score the lowest on these assessments. Valencia (1997) believes that educators produce a cycle of failure by describing deficits, explaining deficits, predicting deficits, and then

prescribing interventions to remediate the deficits. The focus is always on the deficiencies in these children. Once schools focus on deficiencies, they stay in a cycle of lack and destruction. Deficiency cycles destroy motivation, beliefs about ability, and desire to advance.

Cultural deficit thinking takes responsibility away from schools and places blame on the students, their parents, and their environment (Ford, 2003) The theory around deficit thinking posits that poverty causes students to be cognitively deprived and ignorant with low aspirations (Riojas-Cortez, 2000). However, other research has found that teachers tend to set lower expectations for students from low-income homes. Most teachers are unaware of the lower expectations they set for students and the beliefs they hold about them and their situation. There is an accepted belief that students from lower socio-economic communities are deprived or lacking socially, culturally, and economically (Marx, 2004).

Hollins and Guzman (2005) found that negative and stereotypical views of children in urban areas begin before teachers enter the classroom. Predominantly White pre-service teachers enter preparation programs with previously formed beliefs and values about children and learning in urban areas. Pre-service teachers may have good intentions; however, their unfamiliarity with the experiences and cultures of the students presents a challenge (Hollins & Guzman, 2005). Studies found that many White pre-service teachers found underachievement in students in urban areas to be normal and expected (Sleeter, 1995). Schultz, Neyhart and Reck (1996) found that pre-service teachers believe the urban children interfere with their own education through the attitudes they bring to the classroom. Teachers contribute to the shaping of racial self-concept. Teachers are the heart of the school. They set the tone through instruction, room arrangement and verbal and non-verbal cues of acceptance or rejection (Smith, Atkins, & Connell, 2003).

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APPENDIX D: PARTICIPATION FORM

Teacher Course Recommendation Study

Hello! And thank you for considering participation in this study. The purpose of this study is to develop a focus group that will analyze and improve our practices around the teacher course recommendation process. Please complete the form below if you are interested in participating. Thank you!

* Required

1. First Name: *

2. Last Name *

3. Age *

4. Years of Experience: *

5. Gender Identity: *

6. Ethnicity: *

7. Email Address or Phone number where I can reach you: *

8. This study will be conducted in June of 2022, are there any dates or times you will be unavailable to meet with the focus group? This will be taken into consideration as I plan the meetings. *

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