AFRICAN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF TRACKING AND ITS INFLUENCE ON INSTRUCTIONAL DECISIONS AND STUDENT OUTCOMES: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

by

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An applied dissertation submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Education in
Educational Leadership

Charlotte

2024

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ABSTRACT

CLAUDIA M. ALLEN. African American High School Principals' Perceptions of Academic Tracking and its Influence on Instructional Decisions and Student Outcomes: A Double-Edged Sword. (Under the direction of DR. REBECCA SHORE)

This qualitative study explored African American high school principals' perceptions of academic tracking and how academic tracking influenced school principals' instructional decisions. The study sought further understanding of the perceptions of African American high school principals concerning academic tracking as a school practice and how academic tracking impacts student learning and self-efficacy. The study revealed that African American principals perceive that academic tracking affects their instructional leadership decisions and students' learning outcomes and self-efficacy. For this qualitative exploratory case study, the researcher's data source included a semi-structured, one-on-one virtual interview with six African American high school principals in North Carolina. Results of this study indicate that the principals perceived that the beliefs of their school staff and their own racial identity are significant contributors to how academic tracking practices impact their instructional decisions. They also indicate that the principals perceived that academic tracking practices in their schools lead to different learning outcomes and levels of self-efficacy for different student groups by race, track level, and socio-economic status. Implications included the need for educational leaders to mandate professional development to educate school staff using empirical data about the effects of academic tracking in schools, school-based information sessions for students and their families about school academic tracks, and additional research. This study was significant because it was able to further inform high school principals and policymakers about academic tracking practices in United States schools.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is a testament to the unwavering support and love of my immediate family: my husband, Kevin Allen; my three daughters, Njeri, Nyela, and Nahleen Allen; and my mother, Alvira Green, and my siblings. Each of you has been a crucial part of this journey, and I could not have done it without you.

***Kevin**-- You are My Best friend. Thank you for being that friend by my side and telling me, "You Can Do This," even on the days I did not believe I could. Thank you for understanding the many hundreds of hours I spent at Panera getting the work done. I Love you more than words can express.*

***Njeri** -- Thank you for always being a thoughtful partner and my encourager. Your positive energy and scholarly feedback challenged my thinking and pushed me to reflect and express my ideas. It has been amazing to share this journey with you. You inspire me each day. I Love You Dearly.*

***Nyela** -- "Mom, You Got This!" and "Ooo Nice!" were your reactions each and every time I shared a milestone through this journey. Thank you for your encouragement and excitement, which were a source of upliftment and drive to continue. You inspired me to stay the course. I Love You Dearly.*

***Nahleen** -- Thank you for saying, "Mom, you know I can write it for you," every time you hear me complain or get frustrated throughout the journey. How could I not get up and continue? I Love You for your willingness to carry me! My 'Little-Bit' I Love You Dearly.*

***Mom** -- THE WIND BENEATH MY WINGS! Thank you for your Love, Strength, unwavering Encouragement, and Prayers. I am who I am because of you!!!! I Love you to infinity, Mom. Alvira, this is for You.*

*To My Siblings, **Donnett**-thanks for being a thought partner; **Stephoney**- thanks for editing support, making me sound intelligent; **Richard, Kirk, and Veronique**-- Thank you for your words of encouragement along the journey. I love you all.*

To my Village, thanks for carrying me.
To my Ancestors, Thank YOU for paving the way forward.
I am Therefore We Are, We Are Therefore I am!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful to my dissertation committee. I want to acknowledge the significant impact each committee member made on my research, writing, and personal and professional growth processes. First, I recognize the ongoing support, guidance, expertise, and encouragement provided to me by my dissertation chair, Dr. Rebecca Shore, throughout this journey. Her questioning, detailed feedback, and thoughtful feedback were instrumental in guiding my investigation of academic tracking.

Next, I acknowledge Dr. Walter Hart's ongoing feedback on the overall flow, structure, and methodology. His continued encouragement, “Take it one assignment at a time,” encouraged my perseverance throughout my dissertation journey. I am thankful that Dr. Rebecca Shore and Dr. Walter Hart partnered with me throughout the dissertation journey to help me achieve my goal.

Additional committee members Dr. Scarlett Zhang and Dr. Amy Good also provided valuable feedback to strengthen my study and findings. Dr. Scarlett Zhang, for helping me refine my interview protocol and pushing my thinking and understanding of my theoretical and conceptual instructional leadership framework. Dr. Amy Good, I appreciate your feedback on refining the interview protocol questions to ensure the focus was the participants' perspective.

I want to say thank you to Christopher Lacy for running side by side in this journey, you were a source of encouragement along the way, we did IT! Finally, I want to thank my doctoral cohort. Your support and friendship have made this journey more manageable and enjoyable, even when the mountain seemed too high. On difficult days, I've always found inspiration in your optimism.

TABLE OF CONTENT

LIST OF TABLES x

LIST OF FIGURES xi

CHAPTER 1- INTRODUCTION 1

Introduction 1

Statement of the Problem 5

Purpose of the Study 9

Research Questions 9

Theoretical Framework 10

Methodology & Design 14

Significance of the Study 16

Delimitation 16

Assumptions 16

Definition of Terms 16

Organization of the Study 19

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE 21

Introduction 21

Historical Overview of Academic Tracking 24

Track Placement Practices 31

Benefits of Tracking 33

Academic Tracking Influences and Effects on Minority Students 36

Student Preparation 39

Student Experiences 42

Student Self-Perception 47

Teacher Assignment and Resources 50

Student Achievement 52

Administration Pedagogy: Leadership Styles 55

Summary 59

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY 61

Research Questions 61

Research Design 62

Positionality Statement 64

Participant Selection 66

Instrument 68

Data Collection Techniques 71

Data Analysis Procedures 72

Participant Confidentiality 74

Trustworthiness 75

Limitations 76

Summary 77

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS 78

Introduction 78

Recruitment Methods 79

Participants Summary 80

Codes, Categories, and Themes by Research Questions 86

RQ1: What are the Perceptions of African American High School Principals Concerning Academic Tracking as a School Practice? 89

Academic Tracking is the Practice of Academically Categorizing and Separating Students into Learning Groups 90

Academic Tracking Practices are the Results of Adult Decisions 91

Leaders' Internal Conflict with Tracking Practices in their School 92

Multiple Criteria Determine Student Track Placement 96

Academic Tracking Creates Different School Experiences for Students 100

RQ2: How do African American High School Principals Believe Academic Tracking Influences Instructional Decisions at their Schools? 104

Academic Tracking, a Significant Influencer on Instructional Decisions 105

Students' Learning Need Drives Tracking Influence on Instructional Decisions 105

Beliefs Shapes Tracking Impact on Instructional Decisions 109

Racial Identity Shapes Tracking Influence on Instructional Decisions 112

RQ3: What are the Perceptions of African American High School Principals of Using Academic Tracking on Student Learning and Self-efficacy? 116

Academic Tracking Significantly Impacts Students' Schooling 116

Tracking Impacts on Learning Outcomes of Student Groups 119

Tracking Impacts on Self-Efficacy of Student Groups 124

Autonomy to Change Academic Tracking Practices 125

Summary 130

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION 132

Summary of Findings 132

Discussion of Findings 137

RQ1: What are the Perceptions of African American High School Principals Concerning Academic Tracking as a School Practice? 137

RQ2: How do African American High School Principals Believe Academic Tracking Influences Instructional Decisions at their Schools? 140

RQ3: What are the perceptions of African American High School Principals of Using Academic Tracking on Student Learning and Self-efficacy? 144

Implications 146

Conclusion 151

REFERENCES 155

APPENDIX A: SOCIAL MEDIA POSTING 176

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT SURVEY 177

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE 171

APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT 180

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW SCHEDULING FORM 184

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Alignment of Research Questions with Interview Questions 70

Table 2: Frequencies of the Recruitment Survey Questions 79

Table 3: Participants Statistical Summary 81

Table 4: Participants Individual Data: Gender, Years Administrator, Years at Current School, School Type, School Programs 85

Table 5: Themes and Subthemes Related to Research Questions 87

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Percentage of public schools that assigned K-12 students based on ability, community and school level (2017-2018) 7

Figure 2: Theories Underlying Applied Critical Leadership 13

Figure 3: Proportion of Honors Courses Taken by Race/Ethnicity in North Carolina Schools 30

Figure 4: Likelihood of Taking at Least One Honors Course (Grades 9-12) by Race/Ethnicity 31

Figure 5: Purposive/Purposeful Sampling 67

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The concept of K-12 public schooling in the United States assumes students graduate from high school prepared for college and for a profession. In the 21st century, students need to be able to enter a workforce defined by rapid technological advancements and an ever-changing global economy. However, an achievement gap of 8%-9% exists between Latino and African American students and their White and Asian peers (Borman et al., 2021; Cano & Hong, 2020; Riegle-Crumb & Grodsky, 2010), affecting graduation rates and success in college and future careers (Akos et al., 2007; Braddock & Dawkins, 1993; Giersch, 2018).

Notwithstanding an increase in their graduation rates, African American and Latino students still lag behind their White and Asian peers in completing high school and higher education (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023). Concerning this situation, academics consider that structural variables within the schools may have had a significant role in these troubling statistics (Benson et al., 2020; Francis & Darity, 2021; McCardle, 2020; Oakes, 2005). One such variable is academic tracking, routinely used from elementary to high school (Mayer et al., 2018). Research has frequently identified academic tracking as a contributor to this problem (Ansalone, 2010; Mayer, 2008; Oakes, 2005). Academic Tracking has been an integral part of American Education system since the 1900's and has been at the center of educational debate since its emergence in education.

Academic tracking has a lengthy history in public education (Wheelock, 1994). Factors such as increased immigration and newly freed African American children changed the makeup of schools in the United States. At the turn of the 20th century, the number of immigrant families was growing, which led to an increase in the number of students enrolled in schools, particularly in northern cities (Wheelock, 1994). The expanding number of children attending public schools,

which included descendants of formerly enslaved people who had been excluded from school, in conjunction with the growing economic and ethnic variety of the student population, had resulted in the creation of a significantly new social backdrop for the educational process. These new circumstances paved the way for a debate over the goals and methods of public education, which continues today through discussions concerning the reasons behind grouping and academic tracking practice as a school structure (Wheelock, 1994).

The Merriam-Webster dictionary (n.d.) defines tracking as "assigning students to a curricular track." Students are typically placed on an educational path based on their previous academic accomplishments or specific educational requirements. Many teachers and school systems track students according to their talents, academic accomplishments, and future goal aspirations. This is done to effectively teach students and use educational resources (Gamoran, 2017; Hallinan, 1994; Moller & Stearns, 2012; Oakes, 2005).

There has been longstanding debate over the appropriateness of tracking as a school practice. Tracking advocates argue that academic tracking enables teachers to provide pupils with individualized and focused support by categorizing children according to their academic abilities (Kangas & Cook, 2020; Rubin, 2008). They further state that similarly grouped classes contribute to a more focused curriculum, creating an optimal learning environment for all students (Batruch et al., 2019). Kulik and Kulik (1982) and Kulik and Kulik (1984) studied the effects of academic tracking on student achievement and found that students in higher-track classes had higher academic achievement than their peers in non-tracked classes. More recent studies found similar findings that tracking can lead to improved student outcomes (Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2016; Loveless, 2009)

Although some researchers (Kulik & Kulik, 1982; Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2016; Loveless, 2009) have suggested that tracking has improved student outcomes, there is extensive research by other scholars who have maintained that it has perpetuated educational inequalities and resulted in different learning experiences for students (Batruch et al., 2019; Beard, 2019; Buttaro & Catsambis, 2019; Kangas & Cook, 2020; Muller et al., 2010). For example, Muller et al. (2010) conducted a longitudinal study of high school students in grades 7-12 to investigate the extent to which racially diverse high schools provide equal educational opportunities to students from various racial and ethnic groups. Two different samples of racially diverse high schools were utilized for the analysis. The first sample consisted of African Americans, Whites, and Asians and included 26 schools with 3,149 students. The second sample consisted of Latinos, Whites, and Asians and included 22 schools with 2,775 students. They found that these schools varied in the degree to which they offered equal educational opportunities to African American and Latino students during their first high school years. Specifically, African American and Latino students were underrepresented in sophomore advanced-level math classes. The authors claimed that such inequalities in student schooling resulted in lower grades for African American and Latino students in their senior year as well as lower enrollment rates in four-year postsecondary institutions as compared to their White and Asian peers (Muller et al., 2010).

This was the case when comparing African American and Latino students with White and Asian students. The availability of various opportunities in school is related to their academic success during high school and after (Muller et al., 2010). Findings such as these have led to initiatives to detrack students, gaining traction throughout the United States (Domina et al., 2019; Liou et al., 2019; Rubin, 2003; Rubin, 2008), even as educators discuss the merits and drawbacks of tracking students. It is necessary to view tracking through a historical lens to understand how

it has changed over the decades, how it continues to be used in today's schools, and how it affects the ability of students to graduate from high school with knowledge and skills to be college and career-ready.

Along with understanding the current effects of academic tracking on student learning outcomes, it is important to explore the practices of school leaders that can disrupt educational inequities that result from tracking (Batruch et al., 2019; Burris & Garrity, 2008; Cook-Harvey et al., 2016; Giersch, 2018; Oakes, 2005). School principals may have the best opportunity to create beneficial change among the most vulnerable student populations in the U. S., including underachieving, poor, and minority children. This is the case because principals lead their schools and have been shown to affect student learning outcomes secondary only to teachers (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019). Despite a plethora of efforts and billions of dollars in reform movements to close the widening educational gap, the achievement gap persists (Smith et al., 2016).

Student outcome data has shown that children from underprivileged backgrounds and minority groups tend to fall further behind those from more affluent backgrounds (Crosnoe & Ansari, 2016; Ferguson et al., 2007). School tracking structures have been shown to contribute to this widening achievement gap (Batruch et al., 2019; Muller et al., 2010). As both managerial and instructional leaders of their schools, it is the principal's responsibility to create a positive and equitable learning environment and student experience. As instructional leaders, research has shown they can lead school changes so students move to higher levels of accomplishment (Mestry, 2017). They do this by using a wide variety of practices that foster a positive learning environment and remove practices that can detract from students' learning, such as academic

tracking, which has been shown to impede equity in student experiences and learning outcomes (Batruch et al., 2019; Beard, 2019; Buttaro & Catsambis, 2019; Kangas & Cook, 2020).

This topic would benefit from further research because high school principals' perceptions when interacting with teachers and students in a tracking system have generally not been investigated (Cabellaos-Lopez et al., 2018; Legette & Kurtz-Costes, 2021; Liou et al., 2019; Hart, 2020). School principals' perceptions could possibly inform the practices of education professionals who must face difficulties associated with eliminating student failure, particularly when addressing those on the margins of mainstream society. This perceptions study will allow African American school principals' voices to be heard within the framework of critical leadership theory. Also, the researcher hopes to shed light on the reality that educational equity in the U. S. may not be present but may rather be a mirage (Friere, 1998).

Statement of the Problem

America's public school system has undergone decades of educational reforms as people have debated students' needs and the role of schooling. Horace Mann, the father of the 'common school,' influenced one such educational reform (Hendricks, 2023). As the newly elected secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education in 1837, Mann led the Common School Movement to ensure equality in public education for all children (Hendricks, 2023). Since that time, equity in education has been a focal point and a topic of educational reform in political, legal, and academic arenas. School districts nationwide have implemented various strategies, programs, and school structures as part of the struggle to provide equitable education for the nation's increasingly diverse student population (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016).

One such strategy to emerge in the early 20th century was the practice of ability grouping, known in the secondary grades as academic tracking (Oakes, 1986b). Ability grouping separates

students into homogenous learning groups based on perceived ability (Kulik, 1992; Lindle, 1994). Students are sorted by school staff into ability groups according to teacher and counselor recommendations, test scores, and other school records (Kulik, 1992; Oakes, 1986b). Ability grouping is organized differently across schools and within grade levels and can consist of "separate classes in elementary schools for children of high, middle, and low aptitude; single-subject grouping in high school; cross-grade grouping for reading or arithmetic; special classes for the gifted and talented; and within-class grouping" (Kulik, 1992, p.9).

By 1965, 93% of American schools had a formal tracking policy (Arrington, 2013). Since implementing ability grouping, also known as academic tracking, in secondary schools, educators have debated its appropriateness and effectiveness. Education reformers questioned the legitimacy of ability grouping/tracking. In Washington, D. C., Black families filed lawsuits requiring the courts to decide whether tracking provided students in separate tracks with access to curriculum and instruction of the same quality (*Hobson v. Hansen*, 269 F. Supp. 401, U. S. District Court for the District of Columbia, 1967). The decision in *Hobson* (1967) established a precedent in law. Schools were no longer permitted to segregate students into low-curricular tracks under the presumption that those students were incapable of further learning.

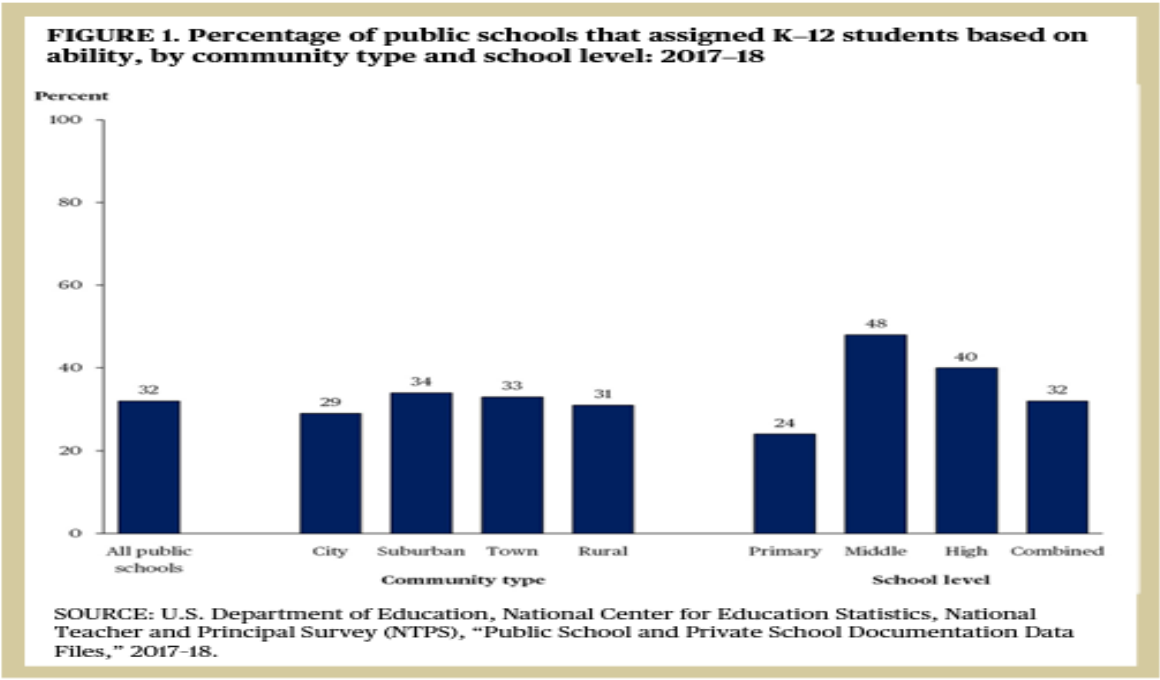
Though the ruling is still in effect, schools have admitted that they are tracking students, albeit under the guise of a differentiated curriculum, by categorizing students using terms such as differentiation, scaffolding, streaming, stratification, or even lanes (Arrington, 2013). These terms are synonymous with tracking. As recently as the 1990s, 15% of U. S. schools continued to adhere to a documented tracking policy that specified how students should be categorized for curricular tracks (Arrington, 2013). Such policies contravene the Equal Protection Clause guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution (National Archives and Records

Administration, n.d.). Since Hobson's (1967) ruling, scholarly debate about academic tracking as a school practice has continued.

Empirical evidence demonstrates the benefits (Batruch et al., 2019; Kulik & Kulik, 1982; Kulik & Kulik, 1984; Loveless, 2009) and adverse effects (Batruch et al., 2019; Giersch, 2018; Muller et al., 2010) of tracking some students' schooling. Specifically, studies found that academic tracking adversely affected African American and Hispanic students who were overrepresented in lower-general, vocational, or specialized instruction tracks and had a positive impact on White and Asian students who were overrepresented in the higher honors and advanced course tracks. Current data current from NCES (see Figure 1) shows that 32% of American schools still employ the practice of ability grouping/tracking, with 40% of secondary schools and almost half of middle schools doing so (NCES, 2021).

Figure 1

Percentage of Public Schools That Assigned K-12 Students Based on Ability, Community, and School Level (2017-2018).



Source: Pre-COVID Ability Grouping in U.S. Public School Classrooms, NCES (March 2021).

Numerous studies criticize ability grouping/academic tracking in secondary schools (Akos et al., 2007; Benson et al., 2020; Chambers, 2009; Slavin, 1990; Stanley & Chambers, 2018). These researchers found that ability grouping has shown long-term detrimental effects on students, such as lower academic achievement, lower career aspirations, higher dropout rates, and lower wages than their peers who were in advanced or college preparatory tracks (Akos et al., 2007; Benson et al., 2020; Callahan, 2005; Chambers, 2009; Stanley & Chambers, 2018; Werblow et al., 2013). Classrooms defined by a tracking structure have become an important factor in student failure or success (Archbald et al., 2009; Benson et al., 2019; Oakes & Lipton, 1990; Terrin & Triventi, 2023). Despite this research, the achievement gap among Latino, African American, and socioeconomically disadvantaged White students (Riegle-Crumb & Grodsky, 2010) challenges principals to make equitable instructional decisions for all students in schools that use student tracking.

While many variables affect student achievement throughout their K-12 education, the ultimate accountability for student learning rests with school principals. Krug et al. (1991) and Krug (1992) wrote that promoting instructional climate was one of the five primary responsibilities of instructional leaders. It is, therefore, the responsibility of principals to provide high-quality, equitable educational opportunities and guarantee that students succeed academically, graduate on time, and are prepared for either careers or college (Bullard & Taylor, 1993; Cook-Harvey et al., 2016; *Every Student Succeeds Act*, 2015; Hattie, 2015). Principals directly affect instructional decisions that account for the quality of student learning, and as such, their voices are critical for reforming K-12 education in the United States.

Although principals play a critical role in the educational process, little is known about their perceptions of academic tracking and how these perceptions affect their instructional decisions (Leithwood, 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020; Mestry, 2017; Zhang & Hua, 2024). This is especially true of African American high school principals, who may have experienced tracking in schools as students and may have taught in ability or curricular tracks themselves. They may bring a unique perspective to addressing tracking within their schools. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of African American high school principals towards tracking and its influence, if any, on their instructional decisions.

Purpose of the Study

This study was conducted to understand African American high school principals' perceptions of academic tracking. In particular, the researcher sought to understand how the use of academic tracking influenced school principals' instructional decisions and their perceptions of its impact on student achievement and self-efficacy.

Research Questions

Three research questions guided this exploratory qualitative study:

1. What are the perceptions of African American high school principals concerning academic tracking as a school practice?
2. How do African American high school principals believe academic tracking influences instructional decisions at their schools?
3. What are the perceptions of African American high school principals of using tracking on student learning and self-efficacy?

Theoretical Framework

Self-Efficacy

Concerns about tracking have historically centered on how a school structures its courses, course progression, and how students are grouped. However, the classroom environment and student self-efficacy (SE) are also essential to understanding student learning and motivation for learning. The term "self-efficacy" refers to a component of social-cognitive theory that can be defined as "the exercise of human agency through people's beliefs in their capabilities to produce desired effects by their actions" (Bandura, 1997, p. vii). In other words, SE considers individual goal orientation and motivation. Those with higher SE beliefs also have a higher degree of motivation that influences their effort, persistence, and resilience in completing tasks (Pajares & Schunk, 2001). Pajares and Schunk's (2001) review of multiple studies found a positive relationship between the strength of an individual's perception of self-efficacy and academic achievement.

The educational environment significantly influences the development and growth of students' SE and their sense of personal capabilities (Bandura, 1994). Bandura (1994) highlighted the significance of education and schools as critical variables in the growth of a person's sense of their ability to succeed. Schools foster the development of students' intellectual and cognitive SE, which includes honing and refining skills and competencies for problem-solving and acquiring knowledge (Bandura, 1994; Pajares & Urdan, 2006). SE has been shown to mediate factors such as academic achievement, perseverance, and self-regulated learning (Trujillo & Tanner, 2014).

Various evidence shows that school practices of ability grouping harm students' SE, especially those placed in lower ability groups/tracks (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2016; Pajares & Schunk, 2001). Students placed in lower-ability groups may experience a reduced sense of SE.

Those who find their performance worse than their peers in higher-ability groups (tracks) also tend to have lower SE in class and may compare themselves to others in their group/track (Pajares & Schunk, 2001). Also, students with stronger SE tend to be more motivated and engaged in learning, which further enhances their learning (Schunk & Mullen, 2012).

On the other hand, a decreased sense of SE for learning and performing well in school can significantly affect students' motivation and engagement, increasing the risk of underachieving and dropping out of school (Schunk & Mullen, 2012). The statistics regarding lower SE of students in lower tracks can have a greater impact on minority students, specifically African American students, in light of the overwhelming research documenting that they are disproportionately overrepresented in lower-tracked classes (Beard, 2019; Modica, 2015; Oakes, 1985), with the likelihood of long-term placement throughout their K-12 schooling (Werblow, 2013).

Applied Critical Leadership

As schools play a significant part in forming children's SE beliefs (Schunk & Mullen, 2012), the classroom environment that schools cultivate through grouping/tracking practices and its sense of community are important factors in student development and academic growth. Thus, school leaders must make instructional decisions that foster a learning environment that promotes and strengthens students' SE. Practicing applied critical leadership (ACL) will give school leaders the means to facilitate authentic change toward educational equity for all students (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2013).

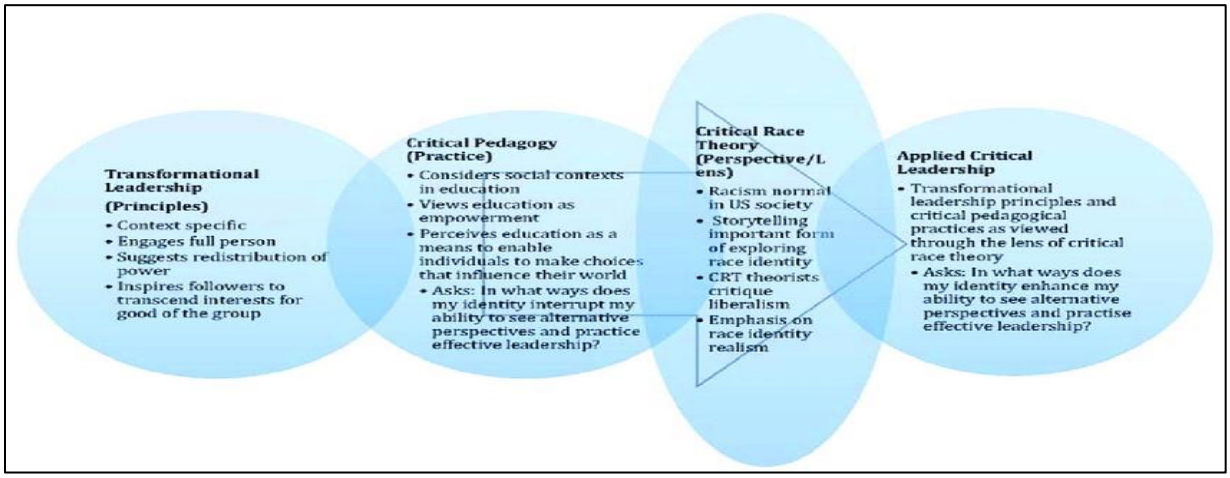
For effective leadership to enhance social justice and equity in educational reform, there must be a common vision and commitment to change schools in response to current demographics and needs (Jayavant, 2016). According to Jayavant (2016), education should not

be used as a means of social differentiation or to continue disparities among social classes. It should also not create unequal opportunities for students. Jayavant argues that social justice "cannot be separated from educational leadership practices" (Jayavant, 2016, p. 3). Instead, it should bridge leadership and inherent difficulties within the learning environment. ACL is the means by which to address unequal opportunities within educational communities (Jayavant, 2016; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2013), such as the differences in student learning outcomes potentially created by tracking practices (Buttaro & Catsambis, 2019; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Harris, 2011; Modica, 2015; Sampson, 2019).

ACL is the second theory used in this study to understand and analyze educational equity for students in the context of school organizations. This approach to leadership emerged from the intersection of transformational leadership, critical pedagogy, and critical race theory (CRT) and was proposed by L. Santamaria and A. Santamaria in 2012 (Jayavant, 2016; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2013). Educators who lead using ACL are best described as having "key transformational leadership principles that are realized through the application of critical pedagogy viewed through the lens of critical race theory" (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2013, p. 8). Figure 2 shows the component theories of ACL.

Figure 2

Theories Underlying Applied Critical Leadership



Source:https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322204158_theoretical_and_conceptual_framework_mandatory_ingredients_of_a_quality_research

Santamaria and Santamaria (2013) defined ACL as:

> [t]he emancipatory practice of choosing to address educational issues and challenges using a critical race perspective to enact context-specific change in response to power, domination, access, and achievement imbalances, resulting in improved academic achievement for learners at every academic level of institutional schooling in the U.S. (p. 7).

ACL is a strengths-based model of leadership practice in which educational leaders consider the social context of their school community and empower community members based on a leader's identity as perceived through the lens of Critical Race Theory (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2013). ACL suggests that when school leaders of color, marginalized individuals, or those who may choose to practice leadership through a Critical Race Theory lens make leadership decisions, they do so informed by the positive cross-cultural attributes of their identities (Santamaria & Jean-Marie, 2014).

Within the ACL construct, African American principals can use their racial identity's positive attributes to contribute to their leadership practices, enabling them to make informed leadership decisions for their students. These ACL practices are explained by Santamaria and Santamaria (2013) as natural behaviors of critical leaders to see and act through a CRT lens "because of their own marginalized identity compounded by the personal experience of membership in a historically oppressed group in the U.S." (p, 7). African American principals serving as critical leaders in their schools are uniquely positioned to make instructional leadership decisions to change school practices such as academic tracking, which research has shown to have harmful consequences for students, especially marginalized students of color.

Proposed Methodology and Design

This study used an exploratory case study methodology design. The purpose of this method for the proposed study was to investigate how participants perceived a phenomenon within their environment (Yin, 1990). An exploratory case study provided an initial understanding and discovery of the phenomena and an empirically supported introduction to the structure, dynamics, and context of the subject of interest (Chopard & Przybylski, 2021).

For this study, an exploratory case study methodological approach was chosen to gain an understanding of the phenomenon of academic tracking (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This research explored African American principals' perceptions of academic tracking and its influence on student achievement, student self-efficacy, and their own instructional decisions at their schools in North Carolina. The product of this study "utilized a thick description strategy to provide a deep understanding of the phenomenon to portray the people, events, and actions within their locally meaningful contexts" (Yin, 2011, p. 213). "A thick description… does more than record what a person is doing. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships

that join persons to one another" (Denzin, 1989, p. 83). The data sources for this study included interviews of African American high school principals.

A purposeful sampling strategy was used to identify participants for the study. In so doing, the researcher was able to deliberately select participants because of their experiences and knowledge of the phenomenon being studied (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This study's criteria required participants to be licensed high school principals working in the selected North Carolina districts for more than one year. Participants had to identify themselves as African American, of African descent, or Black. Further, they also had to self-identify as their school's instructional leader.

Ravitch and Carl (2021) acknowledged that there is no set rule or requirement for a specific sample size or number of participants in qualitative research. Yin (2016) stated that the sample size is determined by the amount of information that can be obtained to answer the research question. Stake (2006) also provided guidance about the sample size for multiple case studies. According to Stake (2006), the benefits of conducting multiple case study research can be surmised from the number of chosen cases. He suggested that the benefits are not particularly significant with four or fewer examples, but ten or more cases can make it difficult for the reader to comprehend the material. The researcher used six participants for this study. This number of participants will provide a thick, rich description of their perceptions and experiences while providing information that is understandable, valid, and contextualized to the perspective of African American school principals (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

An initial recruitment survey was used to identify potential participants. A semi-structured interview was used to collect the data (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). All six participants opted to have the interview conducted via *Zoom*. Both audio files and transcripts were collected

and analyzed multiple times, and member checking was used to ensure accuracy. After analyzing the data, the researcher presented the findings, results, implications, and recommendations for future studies (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Significance of the Study

Despite evidence suggesting that tracking plays a role in contributing to unequal educational attainment, it is widely used in schools today. There was limited research from the perspective of school leaders about its influences on their instructional decisions. Most studies on tracking have focused on the various consequences of tracking at the elementary and middle school levels (Kangas & Cook, 2020; Kulik & Kulik, 1984; Loveless, 2009), mainly in math classes (Riegle-Crumb & Grodsky, 2010). This research study addressed the gap in the existing body of knowledge by understanding specifically African American high school principals' perceptions of tracking and how it has influenced their instructional decisions. This study hopes to inform education reform practices and instructional leadership practices by providing insights that can lead to positive changes in educational practices.

The study specifically explored the perspectives of African American high school principals about academic tracking as an institutional practice and whether tracking impacts their instructional decisions. By examining several high school leaders' experiences and perceptions of tracking as an institutional practice, the researcher hoped to understand better both the positive and the problems that academic tracking may perpetuate in the educational system and beyond.

Delimitations

There were several delimitations associated with the study. First, it focused on African American high school principals in selected districts in North Carolina. Second, selected

participants had to meet the criteria for this study. Third, only six participants were interviewed. Lastly, this proposed research was conducted only during the spring and summer of 2024.

Assumptions

Several assumptions were also made in this study. One was that participants would honestly identify themselves as instructional leaders with at least one year of leadership experience at the high school level. Another was that they would give truthful answers to interview questions. A third was that participants' answers to interview questions would be based on their genuine experiences rather than personal biases.

Definition of Terms

Ability grouping: Ability grouping is the practice of arranging students into groups according to their perceived ability or academic levels based on testing results, past successes, or other qualifications. In this context, ability refers to a student's level of perceived academic aptitude (Oakes, 1985). In a classroom setting, ability grouping refers to putting students in classes with other students with similar skills and aptitudes (Standing & Lewis, 2021).

Academic tracking: *Academic tracking is* a school practice that separates students for educational purposes into distinct classes or series of classes by some established criteria, which may include prerequisites and/ or their perceived ability levels. Students are often placed in one of four educational trajectories during their time in school: college-bound, general education, vocational, or basic education. Each path is typically a unique curriculum tailored to the students' self-perceptions of their abilities and future aspirations (Oakes, 1985).

North Carolina Honors Level Courses: The North Carolina Honors level courses more challenging than standard level courses to foster growth for advanced learners. Honors courses are those with standards written in a progressive nature or courses that require pre-requisite

skills. Courses are distinguished by a difference in the depth and scope of work required (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2013).

Applied Critical Leadership (ACL): ACL is the leadership practice of choosing to address educational issues and challenges using a critical race lens that ultimately can result in improved academic achievement for learners at some level of institutional schooling in the U. S. (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2013).

Critical Pedagogy: Critical Pedagogy in education is the empowerment and critical consciousness development process for individuals within a community regarding an oppressive social context (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2013).

Critical Race Theory (CRT): CRT is a theory examining racial inequalities and race's role in contemporary society (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2013). Santamaria and Santamaria also suggested that "critical race theory has been considered a mechanism or a method to analyze experiences of scholars or students of color within their particular settings" (p. 5).

Detracking: Detracking is a phrase that refers to the process of reducing or eliminating the number of courses or grade-level classes that are organized according to students' perceived aptitude levels (Burris & Garrity, 2008; Burris & Garrity, 2012; Garrity & Burris, 2007). According to Burris and Garrity, detracking is sometimes referred to by educators as establishing heterogeneous or mixed-ability groups instead of ability grouping.

The following definitions are based on how the terms are used in this research:

Ability grouping/academic tracking: Academic Tracking is a secondary school practice of sorting secondary students into different programs of study, referred to as high or low tracks. High-track classes are college preparatory, advanced, or honors. Low track are classes for general or vocational education.

Academic success: Academic success is completing college preparatory or career-ready courses and graduating high school. Prepared for college or a profession.

Black, African American, or African descent: A person whose ancestry can be traced back to any of the various Black racial groups that originated in Africa. Alternately referred to by the term Black.

Equity in school: A school is said to be equitable when it recognizes that some students have a greater need for a greater share of the school's resources and opportunities than other students to attain the same levels of success (Leithwood, 2021).

School leadership: School leadership may be defined as the ability to exert influence on other people within an organization as well as on a variety of people outside the organization who have a stake in the company's success in achieving its vision and goals (Leithwood, 2021). Leaders in public high schools obtain certification for the principalship and are selected by superintendents and other stakeholders. For this study, principals were the school leaders interviewed.

Instructional leadership: Instructional Leadership is the instructional and academic matters that school principals, or assistant principals influence and handle. The acts that school principals take or delegate to others to foster growth in the learning of students and the learning of teachers (Mestry, 2017).

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 includes the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, research questions, theoretical frameworks, proposed methodologies and design, the significance of the study, delimitations, assumptions, and definitions of terms. This study investigated African American principals' perceptions of using

academic tracking in North Carolina public high schools. It explored the specific population of leaders' perceptions of the influence tracking may have on instructional decisions, some of whom may share educational experiences with these inequalities in students' learning experiences, which may be a result of institutionalized academic tracking practices (Batruch et al., 2019; Giersch, 2018; Modica, 2015). Chapter 2 summarizes previous relevant research studies on tracking and school leadership instructional decisions. Chapter 3 discusses the study's proposed methodology and research design, the process for identifying potential participants, the interview protocol, and how data will be analyzed.

Chapter 4 presents the findings from the interviews using themes and subthemes that emerged from an analysis of the data. Chapter 5 discusses the principals' perceptions of academic tracking and its influence on their instructional decisions in relation to the theoretical frameworks. It also presents considerations, implications, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The phrases ability grouping, and academic tracking are frequently used interchangeably but are not identical (Melnick et al., 2016). In both cases, adults try to pair students with academic material based on their aptitude or past performance, but the methods differ in several ways (Melnick et al., 2016). There is typically tracking between classes, and within classes, there is often ability grouping. Ability grouping is a common strategy in primary schools. Most elementary school classes have a single instructor and a diverse group of students. For reading in the elementary grades (K-3) and perhaps for reading or math in later grades (4-6), teachers may separate children into small instructional groups to reflect different levels of ability and promote greater uniformity. One group of students may work independently, participating in cooperative group activities, computer lessons, or worksheets that help them review concepts while the teacher instructs another group. The teacher and sometimes a teacher's aide in an elementary setting alternate between the groups to ensure that every student receives some instruction in these smaller settings.

Ability grouping is more flexible than tracking because the groupings occur within the class and are frequently made by a single teacher. Groups may occasionally be switched to reflect changes in student performance. Ability groups may study different levels of the same textbook series or use the same book and progress at a different pace. This may include enrichment activities for the faster groups until the others catch up. Ability groups frequently adopt various ways of naming themselves, such as those of animals (e.g., redbirds, bluebirds, sharks, dolphins) or the titles of the books in the reading series that the students are using, instead of formal transcript designations such as those used for high school courses (standard, honors, Advanced Placement).

Forming small heterogeneous groups and whole-class education, in which all students in the same classroom receive the same instruction, are the two most widely used substitutes for ability-grouped instruction. Although cooperative learning can be used with any small group and is independent of the criteria used to form it, it is also used with diverse groups (Buttaro & Catsambis, 2019; Melnick et al., 2016; Slavin, 1987).

Tracking primarily occurs in high school, although it can also be used in middle school, usually depending on the school size. Students are placed in various classrooms, learn from various instructors, and follow various curricula in tracked academic topics. High school course names typically indicate curricular distinctions. In the ninth grade, for instance, advanced math students might enroll in "Honors Math 1," while others choose "Math 1" or "Foundations of Math 1." English language arts (ELA) advanced tenth graders may enroll in the "Honors English II" course, while other students take "English II" or "Advanced Placement English." In science, students may enroll in "AP Chemistry," and others may enroll in "Honors Chemistry" or "General Chemistry." History courses may also be monitored when certain students choose not to enroll in Advanced Placement. The comprehensive high school, where all students from a specific community attend and are later segregated into separate tracks, became recognized as the standard of practice in the United States. That is, the same subject is studied by students of all skill levels (Melnick et al., 2016).

Since the 1920s, educators have debated the benefits of tracking as an educational tool (Ansalone & Biafora, 2004). Academic tracking proponents contend that by classifying students according to their intellectual aptitude, teachers could give each student individualized help (Gamoran, 2017; Kulik, 1992; Oakes, 2005). They assert that the process makes instruction easier by personalizing the learning process and allows teachers to adjust lesson plans for

different class levels (Gamoran, 2017; Hallinan, 1994; Kangas & Cook, 2020; Oakes, 2005).

Educators also maintain that parents favor tracking because it guards against children with greater abilities being held back by those with lesser abilities (Kulik, 1992). Further, they advocate that because they are not unfairly compared to more talented pupils, all students can grow more confident in their learning capacity. However, not everyone views tracking through such positive lenses (Kulik, 1992).

Opponents of tracking argue that it fails to raise the academic achievement of all except the brightest students. Oakes, a widely published scholar of academic tracking, argues that low-track classes quickly become places to babysit underprivileged and unruly students (Oakes, 1985). Opponents of academic tracking support their claims with findings from the meta-analyses of elementary schools (Kulik & Kulik, 1984; Slavin, 1987) and secondary schools (Kulik & Kulik, 1982), which indicated that this educational structure has only a small positive effect on academic achievement in more privileged students, typically at the expense of less privileged ones.

Supporters of this view further claim that such grouping is undemocratic and keeps young people divided by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Rosenbaum, 1980). Oakes (1992) noted further that the distribution of learning opportunities is unequal for students in low and high tracks. Some maintained that tracking reduces some students' opportunity to learn by limiting the quantity and caliber of course content offered in lower tracks while providing the best resources (e.g., superior curricula, competent instruction, and favorable teacher expectations) to students who already have the most social, intellectual, and economic advantages (Oakes, 1992; Wheelock, 1992).

History of Academic Tracking

Academic tracking became popular in the United States in the 1920s, but its origins stretch back to the nineteenth century. The first public schools in St. Louis separated students based on ability and content (Ansalone & Biafora, 2004). Until the start of the twentieth century, most American schools were one-room buildings that largely served White Americans of primarily northern European origin (Spring, 2016). The American educational system started to change as millions of immigrants came to the country. As the country's population diversified, American schools began instructing immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, South America, and African Americans (Spring, 2016). With a sharply rising population and rapid industrialization, this transformation in American schools caused a range of requirements to be put in place owing to various societal demands (Oakes, 2005; Spring, 2016). In addition, colleges needed students with standardized educational preparation.

While immigrant families endorsed education as the means to better their children's futures, middle-class families advocated for free education (Sampson, 2019). As part of the educational reform movements begun by Horace Mann before the Civil War and founded on the Jeffersonian ideal of free public education, school leaders focused on effectively accommodating an increasingly diverse student population (Sampson, 2019). It became expedient to teach students by creating distinct learning groups.

As the nation's population increased, secondary schools (grades 6-12) were constructed to handle the needs of society and the educational requirements of a population that was becoming more diverse (Argys et al., 1996). As high school enrollment and student diversity rose, tracking became the predominant way to structure classes (Archbald, 2009; Faulkner et al., 2019; Hallinan, 1994; Oakes, 2005). These comprehensive secondary schools offered a variety

of tracks that prepared students for a range of careers and future opportunities. Some high school curricula offered up to eight tracks, each with different student expectations.

For example, there were tracks for classical education, the arts, engineering, academic, normal, business, secretarial, and general (Wheelock, 1994). This differentiation reflected a compromise between those who believed that secondary school education was of little value for those headed for manufacturing or manual labor and those who thought all pupils would benefit from it to develop their intellectual skills. Separate tracks with labels that reflected students' anticipated careers strengthened the idea that certain pupils were more qualified than others to access particular types of knowledge (Wheelock, 1994).

Sorting and grouping techniques became more complex during the 20th century, although not always in the same way. Student placement into academic and vocational institutions, including agricultural schools, was frequent (Wheelock, 1994). With the advent of the Soviet Union's launch of the first satellite, "Sputnik," in 1957, there was the implication that American students lagged in scientific achievement, prompting the federal government to provide more funding to schools to support programs for top-scoring pupils (also called "gifted" or "talented").

In the mid- and late1960s, the U. S. government committed to raising the educational standards for underprivileged children in public schools with its main initiative, Title I of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* (ESEA, 1965). With the passage of this new legislation, many students who had not been attending school at all now had greater access to public schools thanks to new Title I-funded programs such as special education and bilingual education (ESEA, 1965). Record numbers of children from low-income families, those learning a second language, and those with impairments enrolled in schools (Wheelock, 1994). Their curricula frequently separated them from other students, further dividing the student body.

Programs such as Title I and special education were not always considered in the same way as conventional programs. However, these additions did serve to evaluate and categorize students and offered various curricula to various groups, frequently based on lower expectations. Due to this view, they were included in the tracking system.

Sorting and tracking remained common practices in American schools in the 1990s despite concerns about how well they were educating students for the 21st century (Wheelock, 1994; Mestry, 2017). For instance, 'pull-out programs' in which students usually leave the regular classroom to work with other students of similar ability or interest, and whole- or between-class ability grouping are common methods for those enrolled in Title I, special education, and gifted and talented programs in primary schools. According to a 1993 study by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), it was reported that 82% of middle schools had ability groupings in separate classes, and 72% of the instructors on school leadership teams switched between class groups (Wheelock, 1994).

By the eighth grade, various groups showed distinct levels of information access. As students progressed through ninth grade, the percentage of classes divided by ability increased (Wheelock, 1994). Further, 80% of all schools had tracking structures organized by ability groups classes in which students received distinct learning experiences. The comprehensive high school in which all students of a community attending the same school and then were divided into distinct tracks within that school was the American model (Wheelock, 1994).

Loveless (2013) examined the use of ability grouping and tracking in American schools and found there was a "resurgence of ability grouping in fourth grade and the persistent popularity of tracking in eighth-grade mathematics" (Loveless, 2013. p.13). This resurgence was surprising in light of its forceful condemnation during the 1990s by numerous political groups,

including the National Governors Association, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Children's Defense Fund, and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (Loveless, 2013). There was a resounding call for detracking. Tracking, however, remains a popular practice. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), (2021), 32% of American schools implemented some form of tracking and ability grouping practices before the global COVID-19 pandemic. Forty percent of high schools and 48% of middle schools were implementing ability grouping and tracking (NCES, 2021).

Tracking practices in North Carolina begin early (second grade) using Chapter 115C, Article 9B, of the North Carolina General Statutes, which is the academically and intellectually gifted (AIG) identification process (NCGS, n.d.). AIG designation is determined by the local education agencies (LEAs). LEAs are obligated to uphold statewide AIG standards that have been established by the General Assembly and are administrative policies in the NC Department of Public Instruction (Ferguson, 2022). However, the first step for determining AIG eligibility places significant weight on a teacher's recommendation or referral to the program. This AIG designation stays with pupils as they progress through middle school, having an impact not just on the classes they take but also on how they are finally categorized within the "middle school team" model of compartmentalizing (Ferguson, 2022).

In order to facilitate different "ability"-grouped course instruction for students in high school, the North Carolina State Board of Education has approved the honors implementation framework (HIF) (Ferguson, 2022). The present tracking system was enacted by the North Carolina State Board of Education in 2004, with the objective of guiding the development and evaluation of honors courses and ensure faithful implementation across the state (Ferguson, 2022). In theory, honors courses are intended to provide students with challenging and high-

quality instruction, placing high expectations on them and requiring a greater degree of independence and responsibility (*NC Honors Implementation Guide*, 2013).

Over 500 honors-level courses are currently offered in public schools across the state. In most cases, students are admitted to the honors-level course track through a teacher recommendation process in the fifth or sixth grade, which is influenced by early AIG categorization (Faulkner et al., 2019). Researchers have found that early identification and ongoing ability tracking are inherently flawed and not only put students who are perceived to have lower academic achievement at an academic disadvantage but also do not benefit students who are perceived to have higher academic achievement. Recent research by Faulkner et al. (2019), who reviewed national survey data, has shown that identified high-achieving students in an educational tracking system see only marginal gains. According to Ferguson (2022), students with low academic talents fare better when placed in classes with pupils of varying academic levels.

Researchers have argued that North Carolina school tracking practices have created a segregated educational system (Faulkner et al., 2019; Ferguson, 2022). This system begins in the elementary years, and by the end of the fifth grade, teachers will have prescribed a certain track of classes. These classes continue to stratify children throughout middle school and high school. Faulkner et al. (2019) and Ferguson (2022) further contended that such separation not only leads to changes in the educational trajectory that students choose, but inevitably results in unequal educational opportunities across many educational paths.

Research conducted by the Center for Racial Equity in Education in 2019 considered trends of high school course selections made by 3,055 middle school students in North Carolina according to race (Faulkner et al., 2014; Ford & Triplett, 2019). After investigating the number

of students enrolled in honors-level classes throughout the state, they found that Asian and White students were over-represented in honors courses. In contrast, Black, Hispanic, American Indian, and multiracial students were underrepresented (Ford & Triplett, 2019). Based on the North Carolina student population, in Figure 3, Ford and Triplett also found that the disparity in enrollment in honors courses was largest among students of African descent. Their study indicated that the likelihood of enrolling in an honors course was 23 percent lower for Black students compared to White students, even after controlling for other variables (Ford & Triplett, 2019).

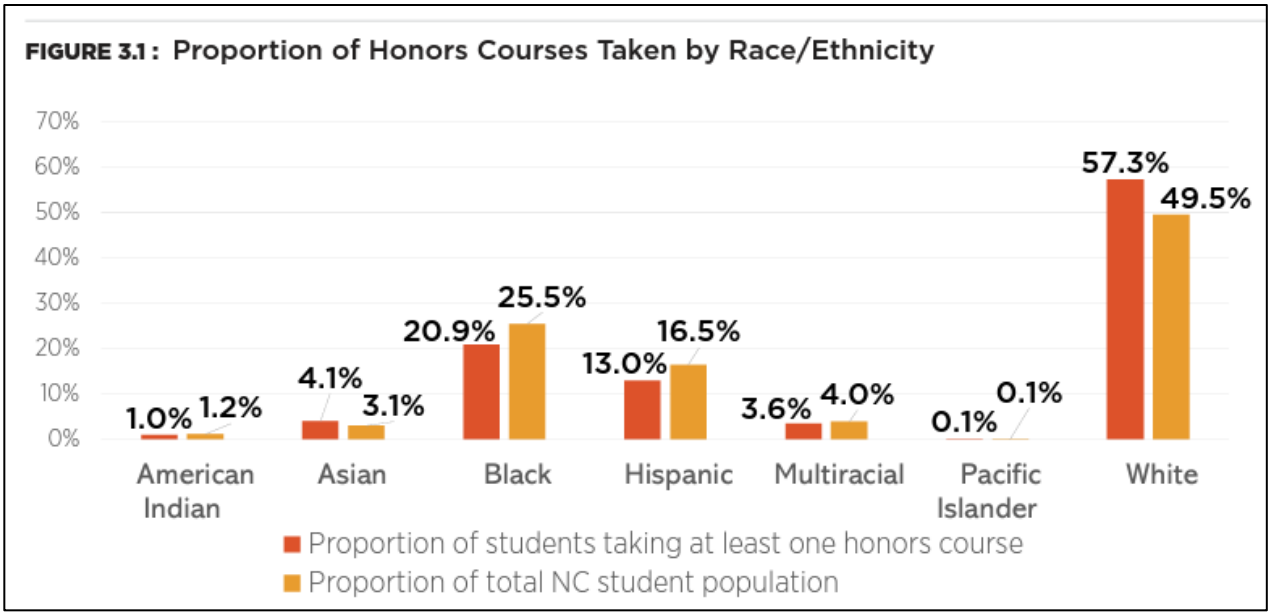
Figure 3 (see below) from the study compares the proportion of students from different racial and ethnic groups who took at least one honors course to the proportion of students from those groups who comprise the total student population across the state. These investigators noted that "Asian and White students are over-represented in honors course-taking, while Black, Hispanic, American Indian, and Multiracial students are under-represented. Pacific Islanders are proportionally represented" (Ford & Triplett, 2019, p. 30). The researchers determined that these racial and ethnic differences are statistically significant; therefore, they are highly unlikely to result from chance. It is estimated that more than 2,700 additional honors classes would have been taken by Black students in North Carolina if they had been proportionally represented in the number of honors classes taken (Ford & Triplett, 2019).

A comparable analysis of the number of honors-level classes taken using White students as a comparison group and projected the number of honors courses taken by each student group of color while controlling for gender, language status, special education status, socioeconomic status, and giftedness (i. e., AIG) (Ferguson, 2022). In addition, they investigated how many students of color in each group were gifted. Figure 4 (see below) shows the findings of the

analysis. Race and ethnicity were significant predictors of the number of honors courses taken by students of color (in comparison to White students), with the exception of Pacific Islander students (Ferguson, 2022). If the participation rates of Black students in honors courses were comparable to those of White students, then approximately 20,000 more Black students would have taken at least one honors course that was offered (Ford & Triplett, 2019). A gap of this magnitude between students of color and other student groups' enrollment in honors courses demonstrates how academic tracking practices in North Carolina's school system promote segregating students by race within the same school.

Figure 3

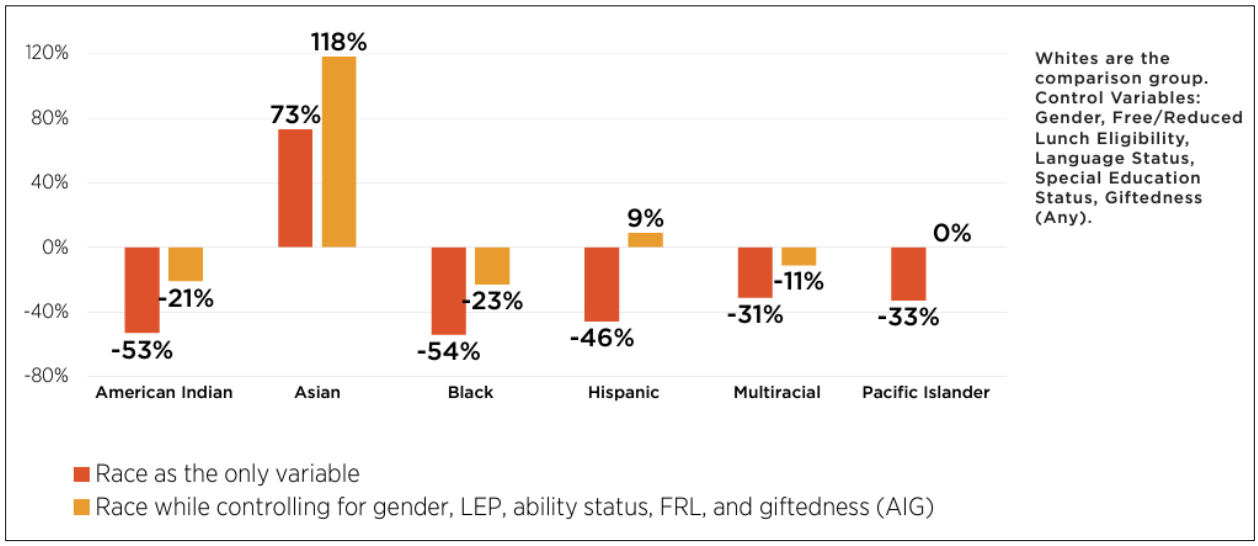
Proportion of Honors Courses Taken by Race/Ethnicity in North Carolina Schools



Source**:** Ford, J. E., & Triplett, N. (2019, December 19). *The state of racial equity in North Carolina Public Schools*. EducationNC. https://www.ednc.org/eraceing-inequities-the-state-of-racial-equity-in-north-carolina-public-schools/

Figure 4

Likelihood of Taking at Least One Honors Course (Grades 9-12) by Race/Ethnicity



Source: Ferguson, T. (2022). *Policy briefs #3*. Center for Racial Equity in Education. https://www.creed-nc.org/policy-briefs

Tracking Placement Practices

Students are typically placed in different tracks based on their perceived abilities to meet the academic rigor of classes (Oakes, 1985, 2005). Researchers identified several strategies that are used by school staff to sort students into different academic tracks. These are high-stakes assessment scores (Argys et al., 1996; Harris, 2011; Kangas & Cook, 2020), grades (Braddock, 1993; Harris, 2011), teacher or advisor recommendations made with or without students' knowledge (Beard, 2019; Harris, 2011; Kangas & Cook, 2020; Rubin, 2008), parental requests (Beard, 2019; Harris, 2011), and students' race and socio-economic (SES) status (Batruch et al., 2019; Ceballos-Lopez et al., 2018; Rubin, 2008). Students rarely, if ever, are solely responsible for choosing to enroll in low, vocational, middle-general, or high-academic programs (Oakes, 1985). The choice of the strategy used by schools generally varies by grade and by geographic location, with most schools using, on average, two to three criteria to place students into tracks

(Argys et al., 1996; Beard, 2019; Braddock, 1993; Harris, 2011; Kangas & Cook, 2020; Rubin, 2008).

Historically, White children of European origin were frequently placed in college preparatory tracks. In contrast, immigrant and African American children were primarily steered towards vocational tracks (Tyack & Hansot, 1982, as cited in Ceballos-Lopez et al., 2018). These tracking practices remained in place until the 1960s and 1970s when there was a shift from school-determined placement to a student-selected track. In this structure, all curricular tracks were available to students, although school officials often directed students into a specific level within that track such as low average, average, or high average (Oakes, 1985, 2005).

The results of tracking/categorizing students according to aptitude have been inconsistent, and the process has created contentious debates through the years (Wheelock, 1994). Claims made 30 years ago that homogeneous grouping practices fairly and properly reflect a student's learning capacity have been refuted (Wheelock, 1994). According to Oakes (1985), all ability groups—high, average, and low—include pupils whose test results fall between the lowest and highest percentiles. Oakes's 1985 study of students' schooling experiences and the phenomena of academic tracking included 25 middle and high schools of 13,719 students that attended those schools The study found that among those with the same test scores, she discovered stark disparities by race in course placement, with White students placed in accelerated courses 70 times more frequently than Latinos, and Asian students more than twice as likely (Oakes, 1985).

Numerous recent studies have shown that academic tracking continues to be prevalent in middle and high schools (Beard, 2019; Bernhardt, 2014; Ceballos-Lopez et al., 2018; Giersch, 2018; Harris, 2011; Sampson, 2019). These tracks included programs that prioritized training a

skilled workforce and college-preparatory programs that concentrated on academics (Oakes, 2005; Wheelock, 1994). The school structure that emerged placed students in strictly planned academic tracks, requiring them to maintain a rigorous study schedule in order to prepare them for particular occupations (Giersch, 2018; Hallinan, 1994). At the elementary and middle school levels, sorting is frequently reflected in ability grouping. It includes both "between-class" and "within-class" groupings, in which smaller groups of students with comparable performance levels collaborate in heterogeneous groups (Buttaro & Catsambis, 2019; Melnick et al., 2016; Wheelock, 1994). Between-class grouping involves separating students into different classrooms depending on perceived ability (Butz, 2011; Sampson, 2019).

Benefits of Tracking

Studies have demonstrated the long-standing disagreement about the benefits and challenges of academic tracking. Researchers reported inconsistent findings regarding the effectiveness of academic tracking for students almost from its start. The connection between tracking and student achievement is intricate and often difficult to understand (Hallinan, 1994). Few studies, however, have examined the possible advantages of classifying students according to perceived ability. This section will describe studies that found positive outcomes related to academic tracking.

Proponents of tracking have argued that homogeneously grouping students positively benefits students' learning (Gamoran, 2017; Hallinan, 1994; Oakes, 2005). They claimed that by grouping students into classes and groups based on their academic ability, teachers are better able to provide targeted and differentiated instruction to meet varying students' learning needs while increasing student achievement. According to Hallinan (1994), students assigned to a higher academic track increased their pace of learning overall, although the impacts of the track

varied by school. For instance, enrolling in an honors track for English at one school led to higher achievement than in another. As a result, some schools seem to benefit more from tracking than others.

Researchers have shown the benefits of academic tracking on student achievement and school belonging for high-achievement students. Kulik and Kulik's (1982) and (1984) meta-analyses of numerous studies proved that ability grouping positively affected student achievement, specifically for high-ability grouped students. In 20 of the 28 studies on elementary school ability grouping, Kulik and Kulik (1984) found that students in ability-grouped classes had higher academic performance. They found similar findings for secondary schools (Kulik & Kulik, 1982). Buttaro and Catsambis (2019) studied the long-term effects of ability grouping on 7,800 students in early grades. Their goal was to determine if reading ability grouping from kindergarten to third grade affects students' test scores and their middle grades' English class placement. The team found that by the end of the first and third grades, students in high-ability reading groups had learned more than those in low-ability reading groups. Additionally, Legette and Kurtz-Costes's (2021) study of 322 middle school students found that students in honors math classes showed increased academic identity and sense of school belonging.

Therefore, students who experience greater school belonging because of placement in an honors math class at the beginning of middle school might be on a trajectory that leads to increased value of school during high school. The study's findings also suggest that students' perceptions of their 'fit' within the school environment changed due to being placed on this math track. An increase in school belonging was mediated by the extent to which they saw academic success as a significant part of their personal identities.

Domina et al. (2019) had similar findings. Their results suggest that high-achieving students often see a quicker increase in test scores in ELA courses than low-achieving students who were placed into ELA classes, according to their previous work (Domina et al., 2019). Similarly, in an earlier meta-analysis of 14 studies, 16,411 students of ability grouping in elementary schools by Slavin (1987) found evidence that elementary students' reading achievement increased when regrouped across grade levels. One of the studies analyzed by Slavin (1987) found that similar programs could be effective in mathematics. There was also evidence that math achievement increased for students in upper elementary grades if the within-class ability grouping was kept small (Slavin, 1987).

Studies also found some positive relationship between academic tracking and students' preparation for college, especially for students in the higher tracks (Malamud & Pop-Eleches, 2011; Giersch, 2008). Malamud and Pop-Eleches' (2011) study reported that students in the advanced level course in high school are more likely to be admitted into colleges and universities. A study of high school students in North Carolina also found that students in honors and advanced courses are more likely to attend and graduate from the state's colleges and universities (Giersch, 2008).

While some studies discovered a positive effect of tracking student success, weak findings frequently constrain the research. A meta-analysis of the results from 31 studies revealed that ability-based grouping of pupils did improve primary school students' academic performance (Kulik & Kulik, 1984). The authors noted, however, that overall benefits on student achievement tended to be modest, increasing from the 50^{th} to 58^{th} percentile for students in the grouped class. The study also revealed that ability grouping produced clear and significant benefits for gifted children who were assigned to special classes and received enriched

instruction. Kulik and Kulik's (1982) meta-analysis of 52 studies of ability grouping in secondary schools also found positive yet minimal effects of ability grouping on student achievement, a tenth standard deviation improvement on average in exam performance, or for the average student in a grouped class, a move from the 50th to the 54th percentile.

Academic Tracking: Influences and Effects on Minority Students

Following Reconstruction, the Freedmen's Bureau, formed in 1865, played a significant role in assisting African Americans recently freed from slavery following the passage of the 13th Amendment (Beard, 2019). Over 15,000 schools with curricula were established that resembled the educational institutions in the North where freedmen might learn to read, write, and other tasks. Getting an education was a way to move forward from slavery and gave those enrolled practical skills for their role in society, such as the ability to interpret labor contracts and other important legal documents.

Even when the Freedmen's Bureau lost its financing, and Ku Klux Klan violence in the South increased, segregated schools continued to teach a limited group of African Americans. Following the Bureau's closure, equity in access to the curriculum has been a challenge. According to Chambers (2009), after the contentious 1954 *Brown* ruling by the U. S. Supreme Court, White animosity to desegregation became overt in a time of intense resistance. The role men and women were expected to play in society, as well as educational equality, was impacted by curriculum choices and student placement that was essentially race-based (Chambers, 2009).

A 1918 report by the National Education Association (NEA), *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education,* called for a differentiated curriculum that should be driven by the needs of society, the character of the students to be educated, and available knowledge of educational theory and practice (Ravitch, 1983). According to the NEA, completing any thought-out high

school curriculum should be considered college preparation. Their advice highlighted the secondary school's need to organize its curriculum so that students could satisfy the demands of democracy.

Public education developed into a significant public policy tool by preparing future employees to meet various social and economic requirements (Ravitch, 1983). Which type of education was appropriate for the future labor that both girls and boys will be expected to accomplish was clearly outlined by the *Cardinal Principles* (Beard, 2019). Since then, research has shown that African Americans and many students have experienced less than equitable educational opportunities due to school tracking practices.

Researchers in the field of education have been concerned for some time about the disparity in outcomes experienced by pupils from various racial and ethnic groups. Though the academic performance gap between Whites, Blacks, and Latinos has narrowed in some areas since the 1970s, children of color and Latino students continue to score lower on standardized exams and graduate at a lower rate than Whites and Asians counterparts (Murnane, 2013; Reardon & Robinson, 2008). They also participate in fewer advanced courses (Corra et al., 2011; Klopfenstein, 2004; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004). It is especially concerning that there is a participation disparity between students of color and White students in advanced-track academic programs because of the possible downstream benefits they offer. The most available national statistics on advanced-track course-taking are for advanced placement and International Baccalaureate courses. Enrollment statistics suggest that among the cohort of students entering high school in 2009, only 30% of African American students took these classes, compared to 44% of Whites and 76% of Asians.

Research on the adverse effects of tracking placement practices on marginalized students groups is well documented and often based on race and ethnicity (Argys et al.,1996; Beard, 2019*;* Muller et al., 2010; Rubin, 2008). Other factors included their status as English language learners (ELLs), having a disability (Kangas & Cook, 2020; Roo et al., 2018; Rubin, 2008), and their SES (Batruch et al., 2019*;* Rubin, 2008). Studies of schools using tracking have shown that African Americans and Latino students are typically underrepresented in higher-level tracks and honors and advanced courses, but overrepresented in lower-level tracks and vocational classes compared to White and Asian peers (Argys et al.,1996; Beard, 2019; Braddock & Dawkins, 1993*;* Muller et al., 2010; Oakes, 1992; Rubin, 2008).

Rubin (2008) conducted a study on detracking practices in secondary schools. He found that schools often develop constructs to support assumptions of students' abilities, thereby rationalizing groups' disproportionality in various tracks. Two important findings about these ability-grouping constructs emerged from this case study of three secondary schools detracking program interviews with adults in the setting, including teachers, department chairs, counselors, and inclusion teachers. Rubin (2008) also examined community and school-generated documents and talked with students.

The first local construct that the schools developed about student's ability was adults' beliefs about the attributes of students, including knowledge and intellectual capacity, motivation, behavior, linguistic competence and unspoken (but hinted at) attitudes about race and class. The second was the result of beliefs about the local community and students' families, including parents' values relating to education, class, race and ethnicity, influence on the school system, profession, and their education (Rubin, 2008, p. 657). Batruch (2019) maintained that these local constructs about students' abilities result in long-term consequences owing to unfair

track placement for certain groups of students. Staff prejudices may be reinforced by these presuppositions and the consequent tracking policies based on them, encouraging teachers to create non-existent intellectual gaps among pupils.

Student Preparation

Whether or not students are adequately prepared for life after graduation is a concern that frequently occurs in conversations about pacing and equity in education. This is especially true for pupils confined to a single classroom, such as ELLs. A study by Callahan (2005) compared the preparation of students in such programs to that of students on the college preparatory track. According to Callahan (2005), fluency in English is not the primary requirement for academic success among ELL students. This is acknowledged even though understanding English is required for education in the United States.

The results suggest that the college preparatory track predicted students' grade point average, credits completed, and scores on the *Stanford Achievement Test 9* (SAT9) and the *California High School Exit Exam* (CAHSEE) English and math portions. Even though ELL programs have the potential to assist students needing to acquire the English language, the study suggested that the college preparatory track was a better predictor. ELL placement was a significant predictor only for the English scores from the CAHSEE and SAT9 (Callahan, 2005).

These findings indicate that even if ELL students are improving in their command of the English Language, such programs are not preparing them for overall academic achievement. Using research conducted earlier by Delany (1991) and Romo and Falbo (1996), Callahan (2005) concluded that it is challenging for ELL students to choose classes from the options presented to them. In addition, Oakes and Lipton (1999) and Stevens (1999) stated that students who are enrolled in ELL tracks are likely to consider their curriculum to be uninteresting, lacking in

engagement, and insufficiently challenging. These studies concluded that student performance suffers when courses such as those used in ELL programs convey to pupils that less is expected of them, and this belief translates to lower grades.

These studies also found that student performance suffers when curricula, such as those used in ELL programs, convey to pupils that less is expected of them, and is related to lower grades. Callahan (2005) found most of the 355 ELL students were enrolled in the English Language Learner track rather than the college preparatory track. This was shown by the fact that only 15% of the students in the sample had completed one or more college preparatory science subjects, while the remaining students were enrolled in ELL classes that were less demanding.

Werblow et al. (2013) used national data from the *Educational Longitudinal Study*, published in 2002. Specifically, it investigated academic tracking as both a school-level phenomenon and an individual student-level predictor of dropping out. The data indicated that academic tracking could benefit or hurt pupils of different races and socioeconomic backgrounds (Werblow et al., 2013). This finding parallels other research (Batruch et al., 2019*;* Kangas & Cook, 2020; Muller et al., 2010; Roo et al., 2018; Rubin, 2008) in that those students most underrepresented in higher-tracked courses were either Hispanic, have an individualized education plan (IEP) or were from lower SES backgrounds. This finding indicates that Latino children having IEPs or who had economically difficult backgrounds were disadvantaged in their experience with academic tracking.

Other findings were that high school students who had not been assigned to a higher track had a risk of dropping, which was approximately 60% greater than those in higher tracks. Moreover, tracking remains a significant predictor of student dropout even after accounting for differences in the academic climate of each school in the study (Werblow et al., 2013). Their

findings also suggested that while the academic climate of a school was important and frequently what divided well-performing from poor-performing schools, simply placing a student on a low academic track strongly affected whether a student would stop attending school.

Riegle-Crumb and Grodsky (2010) also analyzed nationwide data from the *Education Longitudinal Study* to assess whether there were significant discrepancies between the academic preparedness of White students and students of color in advanced math classes. They found that White students had higher grade point averages and test scores in math in 10th grade. When researchers considered social factors such as SES and parents' education, they found that family income and parental education levels contributed to the difference in test scores between Whites and Hispanics. The difference in achievement was largest between students from Hispanic households with the lowest income and White students from families with the same income.

The disparate performance between Black and White pupils was less likely to be explained by differences in socioeconomic background. According to Riegle-Crumb and Grodsky (2010), the test scores of Black students attending schools with substantial populations of students from other minority groups were, on average, lower than those of their White peers. This study supports the hypothesis that students of color have lower levels of academic achievement than their White classmates due to being assigned to lower-track classes (Riegle-Crumb & Grodsky, 2010). This poor performance also makes them less prepared for future efforts (namely, college) because they will have less time to prepare.

When secondary school students are divided into academic and vocational tracks, often only those students who complete higher level/advanced tracks can continue to college or university (Malamud & Pop-Eleches, 2011). These studies support the findings of Giersch's (2008) longitudinal study of 18000 students graduating from the North Carolina school system

and entering into the state's university system. The study revealed that students in high-tracked courses had more likelihood of attending and completing college. Giersch (2008) worked with a cohort of students in a North Carolina public high school and followed them to the state university system. Those who had been in upper-tracks in high school had greater success in college even when results were adjusted for results on high-stakes testing. Also, high-stakes tests were better predictors of college success for upper-track students than for those in lower-tracks.

According to the interviews, these disparities are likely attributable to the various instructional approaches used in the various tracks (Giersch, 2018). With the likelihood that students of color are more likely to be placed in lower tracks, it is important to understand how tracking influences their college readiness (Argys et al., 1996; Braddock & Dawson, 1993; Muller et al., 2010; Oakes, 2005). Other research has considered classroom experiences (Bernhardt, 2014; Kangas & Cook, 2020; Roo et at., 2018; Terrin & Triventi, 2022).

Student Learning Environment Experiences

The atmosphere in the classroom is one of numerous factors that influence a student's ability to learn and is one of the most significant. Classroom atmosphere can assist students in applying the content, cooperating with classmates, and communicating using academic terminology. It also has the potential to establish a supportive environment in which students feel that their academic and personal needs are being met. An unfavorable atmosphere, however, could be detrimental to a student's success.

A problem with tracking, in whatever form it takes, is that it poses a risk of undermining efforts to broaden access to academically challenging material for many students by reducing opportunities for them to acquire new knowledge (Bernhardt, 2014; Kangas & Cook, 2020; Roo et al., 2018; Terrin & Triventi, 2022). Opportunity to learn concerns understanding the structure

of learning opportunities within classrooms and learning groups, including the topics taught and time allocated to learning (Bernhardt, 2014; Terrin & Treiventi, 2022). Understanding the quantity and quality of instruction for low- and high-tracked children is vital because such information provides an awareness about whether students truly gain access to required content, as educational researchers recommend (Harris, 2011).

Researchers have also found evidence that students experience learning differently with different learning outcomes depending on their track placement (Buttaro & Catsambis, 2019; Harris, 2011; Modica, 2015; Sampson, 2019). Apple (2004), writing on social stratification in schools, argued that schools function as mechanisms that provide knowledge and cultural resources to certain students to differentiate them from other students. As they progress through school, students are given various experiences and varying degrees of access to various institutions. They are also positioned within an academic hierarchy that influences educational outcomes and disadvantages students in low-track classes. Darling-Hammond (2010) indicated that various academic paths lead to the rationing of high-quality education.

Oakes (1987) contended that students have varied experiences in school because established curricula create a hierarchy with the most academic or advanced track at the top. Though the methods for classifying students at each school differ, tracking is deeply ingrained in the culture of schools and makes it extremely difficult to challenge or change (Darling-Hammond, 2010). It continues to be one of the most prevalent sources of racial and socioeconomic disparity in American schools (Mickelson & Everett, 2008). Such practices begin in elementary schools and for some students, create an inflexible educational path until high school graduation.

In the elementary grades, almost all students spend their entire day in the same classroom (Buttaro & Catsambis, 2019). Pupils typically encounter an increasingly hierarchical ability groupings/tracking structure as they progress through the grades (Oakes, 1985; Rubin, 2008; Wheelock, 1994). Buttaro and Catsambis' (2019) national longitudinal study concluded that ability group placements of students in the early grades result in separate educational trajectories that become increasingly distinct over time. This finding was the first evidence that linked ability grouping to perpetuating educational inequality in a longitudinal study.

Their study investigated how students' exposure to within-class grouping for reading instruction from kindergarten through third grade predicted their reading test scores and English courses in the middle grades. Data used for the study was from the *Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Kindergarten Cohort*, a national study of a cohort of 1,998 U. S. kindergarteners sponsored by the NCES. The sample consisted of 7,800 students who were followed in kindergarten and the first, third, fifth, and eighth grades.

The researchers demonstrate that students with greater reading abilities in high-ability reading groups had higher test scores than similar students who were ungrouped in the early stages. On the other hand, Buttaro and Catsambis (2019) found that those with less reading ability in low-ability reading groups had lower test scores in every grade studied. In addition, students placed into low-ability groups in the early grades had a greater tendency to enroll in eighth-grade English classes that had content below their grade level. Students placed in high-ability groups in these grades had a greater likelihood of being in eighth-grade honors English classes. These findings suggested that the early categorization of students compared to those not grouped widens each year that pupils are exposed to ability grouping (Buttaro & Catsambis, 2019). In secondary schools, tracking is the dominant practice used to sort students for

instruction, and such course placements were highly static (Ansalone, 2010; Sampson, 2019; Oakes, 2005). Once students were placed in a track, they seldom ‘jump’ (Archbald & Keleher, 2008; Archbald et al., 2009; Oakes, 1985; Werblow et al., 2013).

Sampson’s (2019) case study of students’ 9th-grade math placement influence on future math enrollment and achievement finding confirmed the stagnant structure of track placement in high schools. The longitudinal study was of a large suburban regional high school district in central New Jersey. Data was collected from the graduating class of 2015, from the 9-12 years, which included 1,233 students from six district high schools. The authors found that “Grade 9 mathematics course placement accounts for 17.9% of Grade 12 course placement when controlling for student demographics” (Sampson, 2019. p. 118). This finding agrees with findings from previous research (Ansalone, 2010; Oakes, 2005; Sampson, 2019).

Research has shown that secondary school track placement tends to remain fixed and has been an ongoing problem that can cause Black students to feel isolated and segregated in school, thus impacting their enrollment in advanced courses. Diette et al., 2021, in their study of the impact of tracking on Black students in the education system, found that Black pupils in racially diverse schools may be most susceptible to racial isolation from advanced coursework if there is a noticeable racial divide in the makeup of the classroom. Francis and Darity’s 2021 study also investigated factors influencing Black student enrollment in advanced courses. Francis and Darity's 2021 study of 240,000 high school students from 500 schools across 100 North Carolina schools sought to understand whether enrolling more Black upper-class students in advanced placement courses increases the likelihood that a Black ninth-grade student will enroll in one of those courses. Their findings revealed that Black ninth-grade students are more likely to choose to take advanced math classes in the 11th and 12th grades, depending on the racial makeup of

those classes (Francis & Darity, 2021). The findings support the theory that Black students' under-enrollment in advanced courses is due to a fear of racial isolation. They concluded that if Black students observe other Black students in higher grades who are enrolled in advanced classes, they might also think they have a better chance of succeeding in those classes. Said another way, low enrollment of Black students in advanced courses perpetuates Black students' underrepresentation in upper-track or advanced courses. This may lead to the systematic long-term enrollment of Black students in lower-track courses.

Some students within this structure will likely experience long-term exposure to substandard learning environments in lower-track courses. Modica's (2015) examination of the effects of academic tracking on racial identity and educational opportunities of students at a mixed-race suburban charter school found that long-term tracking created racial borders among students, silencing students of color in honors classes and reducing educational opportunities for all students. Modica (2015) reported that principals and teachers made curricular decisions based on biased assumptions about students and their parents. The educational experience of the pupils in the on-grade level classroom was hindered because the administration presumed that grades were somehow tied to a student's emotional maturity. As a result, Toni Morrison's 1970 novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was removed from the curriculum. This flawed assumption was also applied to the parents of students in non-honors courses. In an interview with a teacher, it was said that parents of the on-grade level students, too, were considered too immature to understand the value of Morrison's text for their children. The teacher explained:

> [I]f you do it with honors students, their parents can listen to a rationale and respond to that calmly. But if you do it with an on-level, it's going to be some uneducated person that calls you up, screaming and cursing at you… (p. 2015).

Modica (2015) claimed that race was an undercurrent in teachers' social class rationale because many of the pupils in the on-level, non-honors course, which was alluded to by the instructor, came from lower SES neighborhoods and were predominantly African American. The basis for these low expectations are assumptions that tie together academic achievement, emotional maturity, race, and socioeconomic class. These assumptions send certain pupils the message that better academic achievement is beyond them.

Another finding from Modica's (2015) study was that the uneven balance of students in the higher tracked classes limited African American self-efficacy and advocacy. As noted above, African American and Latino students are greatly underrepresented in higher tracks and advanced courses (Argys et al.,1996; Beard, 2019; Braddock & Dawkins, 1993*;* Muller et al., 2010; Oakes, 1992; Rubin, 2008). As a result of this uneven racial distribution in advanced courses, Whites substantially outnumbered African Americans.

African American students interviewed reported that they often remained quiet in class, did not contribute even when the topic dealt with race. They told the researcher that they cared about their culture and race but were reluctant to share their thoughts in class (Modica, 2015). African American students in White-dominated, higher-tracked classes found themselves in the position of representing their race. They needed to prove to their White classmates and teachers that they did not fulfill the stereotypes many Whites held (Modica, 2015). These classroom experiences limited the educational experience for all learners by keeping some from adding richness to the conversation.

Student Self-Perception and Academic Identity

Related theories proposed that the experiences students have in their environments before and during early adolescence influence how they perceive the world now and, in the future,

(Bronfenbrenner, 1998; Spencer et al., 2006). As it influences young adults' beliefs about their skills, efficacy, and aspirations, the context of the school is crucial for providing answers to questions about themselves and who they are compared to others (Coll & Szalacha, 2004). Schools inform identity development at that stage (Oyserman et al., 2006; Oyserman & Destin, 2010). This influence has substantial implications for future educational and occupational paths adolescents will take (Legette, 2017).

Though schools are frequently depicted as colorblind organizations that provide equal access to high-quality education for all students, some scholars have argued that schools are a major contributor to maintaining racial disparities in academic outcomes, particularly between African American and White students (Benson, 2020; Buttaro, 2019; Chambers, 2009; Oakes, 2005). Tracking that usually begins in middle school is a means by which schools maintain racial and socioeconomic differences (Legette, 2017; Legette & Kurtz-Costes, 2021; Lucas, 1999).

Placing students in tracks produces significant differences in learning opportunities and schooling experiences which have been found to influence students' personal identity (Modica, 2015; Yonezawa et al., 2002), self-concept (Chmielewski et al., 2013; Kulik & Kulik, 1982, 1984), their academic identity (Legette & Kurtz-Costes, 2021), and school-based sense of belonging (Legette, 2017). For each of these concepts, investigators have found that students' track placement is a predictor of students' positive or negative perceptions and attitudes. Studies have shown that those in higher-track courses tend to have a more positive self-identify, self-concept, academic identity, and school belonging than those in lower-tracked courses (Chmielewski et al., 2013; Legette, 2017; Legette & Kurtz-Costes, 2021; Modica, 2015). These findings, by contrast, suggested that African American and low-income students are more likely

to experience negative perceptions of self and attitudes about school because they are overrepresented in lower-tracked courses (Modica, 2015; Tyson, 2011; Oakes, 2005;).

Modica (2015) concluded that academic tracking influenced students' racial identity and educational opportunities. Students implicitly or explicitly internalized the high or low expectations received from their teachers. The study also revealed that African American students felt that their racial identity was a significant factor used by school staff when deciding on their placement in tracked classes. However, being placed in lower-tracked classes, as almost all were, affected their academic identity and caused them to have feelings of being less smart than their White and Asian peers. African American students associated Whiteness with academic achievement and felt themselves to be "dumb" (Modica, 2015, p. 80).

Legette and Kurtz-Costes (2021) had similar findings. Students in their study showed higher academic identity due to their placement. This longitudinal study examined 322 sixth-grade students in districts in the southeast. Math track placement predicted changes in students' sense of school belonging and academic identity. The investigators found that students in math honors classes had a greater sense of school belonging and academic identity than those in non-honors math classes. They also found this to be important because school belonging was linked to positive academic outcomes such as academic achievement, classroom participation, and academic efficacy.

When students have a greater sense of belonging, there is often an increase in students' positive academic identity and academic success. Thus, students' impressions of their 'place' at school are likely shaped by the negative connotations of 'regular' courses and the value placed on advanced courses. This, in turn, influences their sense of belonging to their school. Those with a higher feeling of school belonging due to placement in an honors math class at the

beginning of middle school may be on a path that leads to valuing school while in high school. The opposite may be true of students in non-honors math courses; they may be on a path that leads to placing less value on school in middle school and high school. Legette and Kurtz-Costes (2021) concluded that placement in math was likely related to differences in academic identity and school belonging rather than math ability.

Teacher Assignment and Resources

The availability of high-quality materials and instruction have been key topics of this research, as these have been shown to increase student learning and achievement. Oakes et al. (1990) found that children who were assigned to 'slow ability' classrooms had significantly less access to challenging instruction that was centered on inquiry and problem-solving in their math and science classes than their peers in 'high ability' classrooms. In another study by Oakes et al. (1992), the team found that compared to low-track, remedial, and vocational classes, high-track classes, such as college preparation courses, typically had more qualified teachers and a curriculum emphasizing critical thinking. This finding that high-track and advanced course teachers are more qualified than lower-track teachers can be supported based on the College Board requirements and recommendations they set for Advanced Placement (AP) teachers to complete prior to getting approval to teach AP courses.

College Board is the organization that facilitates the Advanced Placement program. In order for schools and teachers to be approved to teach AP courses, they must take part in the AP Course Audit, which is the process of having the AP course syllabus reviewed and approved by the College Board to make sure it satisfies the standards set by the College Board for an AP course college rigor (*AP teacher certification: How to become an AP teacher* 2024). In addition to this requirement, the College Board offers several recommendations to support teacher

preparation to learn the pedagogical skills and classroom management techniques they need to teach rigorous AP-level material. These recommendations include teachers with at least a bachelor's degree in the subject taught, three years of teaching experience, attending AP Summer Institute professional development, and another certification process (UWorld College Readiness, 2024). Thus, the College Board teacher preparatory process could be a possible explanation to support Oakes et al.'s 1992 findings mentioned earlier.

Lower-track students have a greater disadvantage in this area than their higher-track counterparts and will likely require more experienced, caring, and emotionally supportive teachers (Donaldson et al., 2017). Kalogrides and Loeb's (2013) study on tracking practices used in three large urban school districts aligned with these studies. They also found that lower-track classrooms were frequently made up of students from low-income families or minority groups and were also more likely to have inexperienced teachers.

Scholars have maintained that disproportionately assigning Black and Latino students to lower-track classrooms with less experienced teachers has a profound impact on their learning outcomes (Benson et al., 2020; Van Houtte, 2004). Benson et al. (2020) examined the dynamics that have led to this disproportionate assignment of Black and Latino students. In particular, the results of their research showed that Black and Latino children in middle school math were taught by teachers with less experience. The differences in outcomes were statistically significant.

Benson et al.'s (2020) study of 280 middle school students in urban school districts located in the southeastern region of the United States investigated whether there was a correlation between the race of students and the amount of experience their teachers had in the subject they taught. The team found that student race is related to exposure to more experienced

teachers over time. Specifically, White students, even in racially varied schools, were more likely to be assigned to teachers with more years of classroom experience. They also found that a cohort of Black and Latino children were taught by teachers with less experience than their White counterparts across four years and different grades.

A teacher's efficacy can influence student achievement, which can be determined using value-added measures, classroom observations, and questionnaires completed by students. Benson et al. (2020) claimed that veteran educators have a greater impact on their students' learning than less experienced colleagues. Patterns of teacher-student matching practices by student race have been attributed to "persistent racial segregation in desegregated schools, second-generation student segregation, and student tracking" (p. 14). Their findings emphasized the harmful effects of racial segregation on students of color and support the need for greater administrative intervention regarding teacher-student assignments and racial fairness in schools. As a result of their findings, they concluded that one of the most significant causes of the success gap might in fact be created by schools themselves due to the presence of structural racism when pairing teachers and students (Benson et al., 2020).

Academic Tracking and Student Achievement

The achievement gap has long been a significant concern to many educators. The practice of tracking has been criticized by those who believe tracking worsens the performance gap that exists between racial and ethnic minorities, children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and children who require special education (Batruch et al., 2019; Beard, 2019; Kangas & Cook, 2020; Terrin & Triventi, 2022; Oakes & Lipton, 1990). Early studies on the effects of tracking and student achievement reported small but positive effects, mainly for those in higher-tracked classes (Kulik & Kulik, 1982, 1984).

Kulik and Kulik (1984) examined 31 studies related to the effects of grouping in elementary schools. They found that ability grouping positively affected student achievement. Twenty of the 28 studies that examined achievement found that students performed better in grouped classes, whereas the remaining eight concluded that students performed better in ungrouped classes. In these 28 studies, the effect of grouping increased student performance on achievement tests by an average of 0.19 standard deviations, which is equivalent to about two months for each student or student achievement test scores increasing from the 50th percentile to the 58th.

Kulik and Kulik (1982) had similar but less significant findings in their meta-analysis of 52 studies on the effects of ability groupings on secondary students. For secondary students in ability-grouped classes, an average increase of 0.1 standard deviation was observed on exam scores. This equates to an increase from the 50th to 54th percentile. They found that the size of the achievement effect differed based on the type of student grouping. For example, students in the high-ability group, who received more "enriched instruction in honors classes, produced especially clear effects… while studies of average and below average students produced near-zero effects" (Kulik & Kulik, 1982, p. 415). The finding by Kulik and Kulik (1982) that tracking systems have greater benefits for high-ability-grouped students and bears out what opponents of tracking have argued: school tracking can create inequities in student learning and achievement (Batruch et al., 2019; Beard, 2019; Buttaro & Catsambis, 2019; Lucas, 1999; Muller et al., 2010; Oakes, 2005).

Contrary to the findings of Kulik and Kulik's (1982, 1984) studies, opponents of tracking have found the practice to have negative effects on student achievement (Argys et al., 1996; Batruch et al., 2019; Beard, 2019; Buttaro & Catsambis, 2019; Butz, 2011; Chambers, 2009;

Kangas, 2020; Muller et al., 2010; Oakes & Lipton, 1990). As stated earlier, the learning experiences are significantly different for students on the lower-academic tracks, which are comprised of predominantly African American and Latino students (Archbald & Keleher, 2008; Batruch et al., 2019; Benson et al., 2020; Chambers, 2009).

Critics of tracking argue that the difference in student track placement is one of the main reasons for the persistent achievement gap for these students (Archbald et al., 2009; Benson et al., 2020; Oakes & Lipton, 1990; Terrin & Triventi, 2022). Researchers have debated whether the correlation between tracking and student achievement gaps supports the conclusion that tracking limits student learning (Klopfenstein, 2004; Harris, 2011).

Argys et al. (1996) found that students in low-tracked classes that were reassigned to heterogeneous classes had an 8.6% improvement in their math performance. Chambers (2009) conducted a qualitative study of the effects of tracking African American high school students on their achievement. They concluded that the term ‘achievement gap’ was an inappropriate way to describe the difference between a Black student’s performance and that of their White counterparts. Chambers (2009) proposed that the gap among the Black students resulted from their placement in a lower track and their subsequent exposure to weaker instructors and other classroom conditions and classroom management methods that were inferior to those used in higher track, mostly White, classrooms.

Callahan’s (2005) study examined the effects of tracking on the learning outcomes of ELLs. The conclusion drawn was that “tracking plays a much larger role than previously believed in predicting English learners’ academic achievement” (p. 324), which was the result of the fact that “English learners were clustered primarily in non-college-preparatory coursework; a

few students managed to ‘jump track’ and experience academically challenging coursework” (p. 324).

Butz’s (2011) study investigated the influence of tracking on student achievement, students’ and teachers’ self-perception, and teachers’ instructional practices. As was true of Argys et al.’s (1996) research, students in lower-tracked classes tended to encounter teachers, class settings, and classroom management methods strikingly different from those in higher track classes. Observations showed that students in the lower-tracked classes experienced teacher-centered instructional strategies, such as note-taking and lectures. However, those in average and higher-level classes used more cooperative learning strategies and higher-level cognitive activities.

For Butz (2011), these findings explained why African American students performed at lower levels than their White or Asian counterparts. The consistent evidence of not being proficient or performing at basic or below basic levels illustrated that students enrolled in lower-level courses are likelier to perform inadequately than those enrolled in more academic courses or tracks. Further, African American students tended to score lower compared to Whites and Asians on standardized assessments.

Administrative Pedagogy: School Principals’ Leadership Styles

In order to create a school culture focused on teaching and learning with high learner achievement, principals must balance administrative and managerial responsibilities with instructional leadership (Mestry, 2017). Essentially, instructional leadership focuses on transforming schools into more supportive learning and teaching settings so teachers and students can realize their full potential. Mestry (2017) described instructional leadership as “those actions that school principals take, or delegate to others, to promote growth in learners’

learning" (p. 261). Scholars have described instructional leadership behaviors of school principals as those that guide a school to educate all students to a high level of achievement (Alig-Mielcarek, 2003; Mestry, 2017; Yu, 2009). This goal defines and communicates the common goal of school leaders, and monitors and provides feedback on the teaching and learning process, and encourages professional growth throughout the school.

The literature on principal instructional leadership can be traced to the mid-20th century in the U. S. The year 1940 was pivotal in developing this line of research because articles published in the *Bulletin* of the NASSP encouraged principals to be instructional leaders rather than simply principals (Hallinger et al., 2020). The 'effective school' movement in the 1970s endorsed this idea, which was a uniquely American phenomenon. Around the turn of the millennium, a worldwide education accountability movement was initiated. As part of this movement, the goals of education systems were rewritten, and student achievement became the primary criterion for determining the success and advancement of educational initiatives. As a result, instructional leadership has become a model for school leadership applied in the U. S. and the U. K. (Hallinger et al., 2020).

Several instructional leadership models have been proposed. The one initially proposed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) will be emphasized because it is the model most used in empirical research. Similar to other models, it involves the principal in instructional leadership and has three dimensions: defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive learning climate in the school (Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger, 2010).

More recent research has subdivided these dimensions into 10 instructional leadership functions (Hallinger, 2005, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2020). The first dimension focuses on defining the school's mission and vision in which the leader is goal-oriented and creates an

academically centered school culture. In the second dimension of managing the instructional program, the principal's concern is coordinating and managing the curriculum and instruction. As the instructional leader, the principal must be actively involved in encouraging, supervising, and monitoring teaching and learning in the school. These aspects contribute to managing instructional program effectively and are three leadership duties management functions: monitoring student progress, coordinating the curriculum, and supervising and evaluating the instruction provided.

The third dimension is fostering a positive school environment. The learning environment is composed of various functions:

- Protecting instructional time
- Promoting professional development
- Maintaining high visibility
- Providing incentives for teachers' high expectations and standards
- Giving incentives for learning.

This dimension has a more expansive scope and purpose than the previous two. It is consistent with the idea that successful educational institutions generate academic pressure by establishing rigorous standards and expectations for students and teachers. A culture of continuous improvement that is effective for instruction is developed in these schools. A culture of this type ensures that rewards for students and staff align with the school's goals and practices (Hallinger, 2005, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2020).

Since the 1940s, the popularity of instructional leadership has been like a pendulum; each rise in its popularity is a result of its direct impact on an increase in student accomplishment (Hallinger et al., 2020). Beginning in the 2000s, a series of studies have given compelling

empirical evidence that supported the efficacy of instructional leadership in the context of initiatives that promote student learning (Hallinger et al., 2020).

As the school's instructional leader, the principal is responsible for conveying the school's mission. The principal can influence teachers' behaviors and create conditions that foster effective classroom instruction. The interaction between teachers and the school administrator can be inferred from the content taught and how it is presented (Hallinger et al., 2020). Liethwood (2021) argues that effective school leaders foster high-performance expectations for students and staff. As part of these high-performance expectations, they stimulate growth in the professional capacity of staff by prioritizing opportunities for professional development with opportunities for practice and criticism (Liethwood, 2021). Cox and Mullen's (2023) study of principals' instructional leadership impact on student achievement found a positive relationship between student achievement when the principals create a learning environment where teachers have collaborative planning, data meetings, and informal observations with feedback or coaching.

For certain schools, the track level predicts the type of instruction, curriculum, resources, and management styles used in the classroom (Benson et al., 2020; Donaldson et al., 2017; Oakes et al., 1992; Smith et al., 2016; Van Houtte, 2004). Therefore, it is the responsibility of principals to navigate the educational process to ensure good student performance. Most stakeholders hold the site principal responsible for student failure, so many education theorists believe that the principal should be given authority to run schools. This is despite the belief of other theorists that high student achievement is the collective responsibility of the teachers, students, and parents.

The relationship that principals have with the education community and other stakeholders may impact student outcomes, though the principal may not directly influence those outcomes. A healthy school atmosphere is the product of administrative leadership, clearly stated goals, a mission with high expectations included, and the activities of both instructors and students are monitored. In many schools, the principal is the individual who is accountable for implementing policies designed to organize students.

The literature on academic tracking presents its impacts and influences on students learning (Kulik & Kulik, 1982; Legette & Kurtz- Costes, 2021; Oakes, 2005; Slavin, 1990; Terrin & Triventi, 2022). Investigators have also studied the perceptions of students (Legette & Kurtz-Costes, 2021; Modica, 2015; Stanley & Chambers, 2018; Yonezawa et al., 2002) and teachers (Ansalone & Biafora, 2004; Liou et al., 2019; Oakes, 1985) about academic tracking. A gap in the current research is the perception of African American high school principals about academic tracking and its influence on their leadership practices.

Summary

Chapter 2 presented a literature review of academic tracking as a school structure in U.S. K-12 public education and began with a historical overview of academic tracking. Next, the chapter described track placement practices and the benefits of tracking for some student groups. A significant emerging theme with sub-themes was found in the literature: the negative long-term effects of academic tracking on Black and Latino students' learning experiences and achievement.

The chapter also reviewed leadership models that integrate instructional leadership styles. The gap found in the research was the perceptions of high school principals, and even more specifically, African American high school principals, about academic tracking and its influence

on their leadership decisions and student outcomes. Chapter 3 details the proposed study's methodology.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Chapter 1 introduced the rationale and scope of the study, and Chapter 2 provided a literature review focusing on salient topics regarding academic tracking. The current chapter describes the methodology that was used to facilitate the study, including the research questions, data collection procedure, participant characteristics, data analysis, and measures to ensure the protection of participants and the trustworthiness of the study.

This study adheres to the constructivist paradigm developed by Lincoln and Guba, who acknowledged the possibility of many realities and experiences existing concurrently within a qualitative study (Shannon-Baker, 2022). When describing social constructivism, Crotty (1998) suggested that absolute truths do not exist; rather, meaning develops as people interact with the world around them. This explains why different people may develop very different perspectives about the same phenomenon. Therefore, a researcher's goal is not to determine some unflappable truth but to explore how participants understand a situation.

The constructivist paradigm is appropriate as a case study that intends to provide descriptions from a limited number of participants about their perspectives. This case study will serve as the framework for an investigation into African American high school principals' subjective perceptions concerning academic tracking. This study aimed to understand how African American high school principals in North Carolina perceive academic tracking and its impact on their instructional decisions.

Research Questions

The researcher considered the perceptions of African American high school principals on academic tracking and how this widespread practice affects their instructional decisions. As it is

the school leader's primary responsibility to provide an equitable learning environment for all students (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016; *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), 2015; Hattie, 2015), The researcher sought to understand principals' views on tracking and whether its use influences their instructional decisions and ability to provide an equitable learning environment.

The following three research questions guided this exploratory qualitative study:

RQ1. What are the perceptions of African American high school principals concerning academic tracking as a school practice?

RQ2. How do African American high school principals believe academic tracking influences instructional decisions at their schools?

RQ3. What are the perceptions of African American high school principals of using academic tracking on student learning and self-efficacy?

Research Design

A qualitative exploratory case study was selected for the study in order to develop an understanding of African American principals' perceptions of school tracking practices and their impact on their instructional decisions. This approach provided an understanding of the subject as participants shared their perceptions of academic tracking and described how it affects their leadership decisions. This chapter explains the rationale for selecting and using an exploratory case study methodology and how that method aligns with the research questions. In addition, I used an applied critical leadership framework to understand whether or not African American principals perceive that academic tracking practices influence their leadership decisions in their role as instructional leaders in their schools.

According to a guide published by the University of Southern California library (2020), the phrase "case study" can refer to both a method of analysis and a specific research design for

conducting empirical inquiry in the social sciences. Yin (1990) defined a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (p. 23). An exploratory case study aims to investigate, using various means, how participants understand a phenomenon in the context of their surroundings (Chopard & Przybylski, 2021).

An exploratory case study is appropriate for this research for several reasons outlined by Hancock et al. (2022). First, a case study involves exploring a phenomenon in its natural context. In this study, it is essential to explore how the participants’ perspectives intersect with the context of being high school principals and the expectations of the role. For example, the participants’ views of academic tracking may or may not always align with district expectations for its use. Second, a case study commonly focuses on individual representatives of a larger group. This study focused on participants representing a much larger group of similarly situated African American high school principals. Third, a case study is highly descriptive because it relies on participants' narratives to describe the nuances of the phenomenon of study. This study employed direct quotations from participants to describe their experiences with implementing academic tracking despite research demonstrating that it may contribute to inequitable outcomes for students who are racially similar to the participants.

According to Hancock et al. (2022), exploratory case studies are more illustrative than predictive because they are not experimental. That is the case with this study. Rather than testing hypotheses, I explored themes or categories of behaviors from a small group of participants. Despite not having the generalizability of experimental research, exploratory case studies like

this one can still provide insights about a phenomenon that may inform policymakers and practitioners.

Positionality Statement

I am an African American woman who has served as an educator for 34 years in K-12 public schools and higher education. For 25 years, I have served in two urban school districts as a teacher, instructional facilitator, coach, principal, and district specialist. I am also an instructional pedagogy content developer and professional development facilitator for multiple U.S. school districts. Through my comprehensive knowledge and experiences as an educator, I have firsthand knowledge of school practices that can positively or negatively impact student learning outcomes.

I have taught in high schools that utilized academic tracking. As a school leader in the elementary setting, I have assigned students to different ability groups within a class and across grade levels. Through practice and observations, I have observed that most students placed in lower-track classes and courses have been Black and Latino. In contrast, their White and Asian counterparts were placed in higher ability groups and tracks (i.e., honors and advanced courses).

As a veteran African American educator in North Carolina public schools, I am keenly aware of how academic tracking practices can hinder academic access and achievement for students of color. Generally, I have experienced schools that sort students into the academically gifted and regular academic track by the second grade. I have experienced elementary school end-of-grade standardized assessments, teacher recommendations, and other formative data strongly influencing a student's academic track placement in middle school. This placement then largely determines whether the student completes the honors or non-honors course track in high school (advanced or regular courses). In other words, it has been my experience that lasting

decisions about students' academic tracks are made very early in their formal schooling and rarely change.

Many parents, family members, and friends of students have sought my professional advice about the best middle and high school course placement for their children. One goal drove these parents to seek my counsel: getting their students on the 'right track' that will provide the best opportunity for academic and career success. Most of the families seeking my counsel were African American. Such personal, professional, and racial connections to school tracking practices benefit my role as a researcher because they provide knowledge and familiarity with school tracking practices at both the elementary and secondary school levels.

While my professional experiences provide me with firsthand knowledge and perceptions about tracking that will benefit this study, these experiences also create biases. For example, as a school leader, I stopped the practice of academic tracking because I felt doing so would benefit students. Additionally, as a district leader, I have advocated that tracking not be used. I served on several school reform committees within the New York City Public Schools, and the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools that informed the transformation of comprehensive high schools into smaller schools focused on reforms through transformational leadership rather than tracking. Although my beliefs and negative experiences with academic tracking might pose a potential bias in the research process, I countered such perceptions by engaging in the reflexivity process of dialogue engagement.

Reflexivity in qualitative research is actively analyzing one's subjective point of view and determining how an investigator's subjectivity may influence the results of their research (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). "Dialogic engagement" is a reflexivity strategy in which the researcher systematically participates in generative structured discussions with purposefully selected

individuals throughout the research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p. 118). Scheduling structured discussions during a study will create accountability for an investigator's interpretations and enable rigorous challenges of their potential biases and assumptions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To minimize my biases, I participated in dialogic engagement with various members of my dissertation committee throughout the research process.

Further, I used the process of phenomenological reduction, also known as bracketing. This is the scientific process of suspending presuppositions, biases, assumptions, theories, or previous experiences in order to see and describe the phenomenon presented by the participants (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Tufford & Newman, 2012). A researcher must suspend (i.e., put in parenthesis off to the side, as it were) foreknowledge about the phenomenon under study to present "an unprejudicial description of the essence of the phenomena" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 31). Lastly, I utilized participant validation (member checking) by having participants review their interview transcripts to check the researcher's interpretations of their statements to correctly reflect their intent (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Participant Selection and Setting

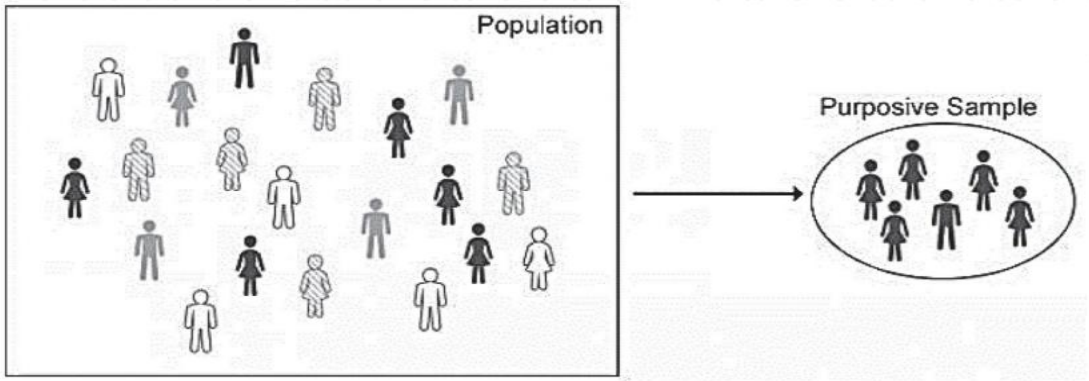
There is much debate about the sample size for qualitative research. A critical component when deciding the number of participants for a qualitative study is what the researcher wants to know (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The chosen participants should be able to answer all the study questions in depth to arrive at complicated and multi-perspective understandings that are authentic and contextualized (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Thus, a combination of purposeful (purposive) and convenience sampling was used to select the six participants in this study.

Purposeful sampling was used for this research because there is a limited number of African American high school principals in the North Carolina Southwestern districts who can

serve as primary data sources for the study (see Figure 5) (Dudovskiy, n.d.). By employing purposeful sampling, I was able to select participants based on their ethnicity, experience, and level of familiarity with the phenomenon being investigated (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Figure 5

Purposive/Purposeful Sampling



Source: https://research-methodology.net/sampling-in-primary-data-collection/purposive-sampling/

Inclusion Criteria

Participants in this study were licensed high school principals working in North Carolina districts who self-identify as African Americans or people of African descent/Black. They had at least one year of experience as high school principals and must acknowledge that they are instructional leaders in their schools. There were no other limitations on participation, such as gender or personal or professional characteristics.

The North Carolina Southwest Region school district was selected as this study's focus area. The southwest region, district 6, is one of eight regions in North Carolina. The southwest region is the home of 10 school districts in a mixture of rural, suburban, and urban locations. District size ranges from small districts, serving 6,000, to large districts, the largest serving 141,000 students. The Participant pool of candidates was selected from the schools in this region.

This region was selected for several reasons. First, was the proximity of schools to the researcher. Second, the region provided a participant candidate pool to render enough participants for the study. Third, this region provided a participant pool from a diverse population of the school setting, such as rural, urban, large, and small districts, and specialized and non-specialized high school programs.

Once I received approval from the sponsoring university IRB process, the researcher posted a social media posting about the study on several social media sites, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram (see Appendix A), to attract potential participants with a description of the study, requirements for participation, and a link for the recruitment survey (see Appendix B). In addition, the researcher offered each participant a $10 Amazon gift card to increase participation in the study. The researcher received fifteen returned recruitment surveys. The researcher reviewed each returned recruitment survey to confirm that the respondents met the criteria for inclusion in the study. Next, the researcher sent consent to each potential participant; once the informed consent was returned to the researcher, individualized invitations were sent via email to participate in an in-person or virtual interview. The researcher selected participants over whom she has no supervisory or evaluative role.

Instruments

The investigator used one demographic survey and one interview protocol. The survey was created using a Google Form document. It described the study and the participation criteria and included seven questions aligned with those requirements (see Appendix B).

Demographic Survey

The recruitment survey was used to explain the study, establish participant criteria and solicit potential candidates interested in participating in the study. The recruitment

survey asked seven questions. The recruitment survey questions asked the following information: licensure status, administrative status, leadership experiences, school location, and self-identification of race and as an instructional leader within their school. The survey collected personal and professional information that gave the researcher adequate information to determine whether participants met the participation requirements. The survey allowed candidates to indicate interest in the study and provide contact information if they wanted to participate in the study (see Appendix B).

Interview Protocol

The data collection instrument was a one-on-one semi-structured interview protocol that was used via Zoom interview sessions. The interview protocol (see Appendix C) addressed two phenomena of African American principals in North Carolina: their perceptions of academic tracking and if and how it impacts their instructional leadership decisions. The semi-structured interview session had an 11-question interview guide, a collection of questions designed to address the research questions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The interview questions are aligned with the research questions (see Table 1) (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p.158). The first three questions of the interview protocol aligned with the research question as they sought to have participants describe their perception of academic tracking and its use as a school practice. Interview questions four and five aligned with research question two as those questions explored the participant's perception of tracking's influence on their instructional decisions. Interview questions six through eleven aligned with research question three as those questions sought to investigate the participant's perceptions of academic tracking's impact on students' learning outcomes and self-efficacy. To increase the validity of the interview protocol, the

researcher conducted a field test of the interview protocol with qualitative research experts from the university (Bagdady, 2020). A field test process is discussed in further detail in the trustworthiness section of this chapter.

Table 1

Alignment of Research Questions with Interview Questions

Phenomena Examines	Research Question	Relevant Interview Questions
Principal Perceptions of Academic Tracking	RQ1: What are the perceptions of African American high school Principals concerning academic tracking as a school practice?	1. How would you define or describe school academic tracking practices? 2. What has been your experience with academic tracking practices? 3. What are your feelings and thoughts about using academic tracking effectiveness as a school practice? On what specifically do you base these thoughts?
Academic Tracking Influence on Instructional Decision	RQ2: How do African American high school Principals believe academic tracking influences instructional decisions at their schools?	4. How does academic tracking affect instructional decisions in your school? 5. How does your identity as an African American principal affect your decisions about academic tracking? .
	RQ3: What are the perceptions of African American high school Principals of using tracking on students learning at their schools and, student self-efficacy?	6. How do you think academic tracking impacts students' school experiences? 7. How do you think academic tracking impacts students' learning outcomes? 8. How do you think academic tracking impacts students' self-efficacy? 9. Which economic and racial groups of students participate in advanced programs and courses most frequently in your school? Why? 10. Does academic tracking affect the learning outcomes and self-efficacy of students from various economic and racial groups differently? If so, how?

Table 1

Alignment of Research Questions with Interview Questions (continued)

	11. Do you perceive you have the authority to change institutional structures such as tracking in your school? Why? Or Why not?

Data Collection Procedure and Sampling Techniques

Once the university's IRB approved the research, the researchers posted a study announcement blurb that included the link to the Google Form recruitment survey on three of her social media sites, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram (See Appendix A) (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

The researcher received fifteen completed recruitment survey responses from candidates interested in participating in the study. The researcher reviewed each recruitment survey received to confirm that the interested candidates met the inclusion criteria. Next, the researcher emailed all qualified candidates the informed consent form for review and received signed consent via Adobe Acrobat Sign (see Appendix D). This form explained the purpose of the study, the possible risks and benefits of participating, and the strategies that will be used to safeguard participants' identities and keep data secure. Next, the investigator emailed each of the ten participants a Google Form to select a time for the interview session (See Appendix E). The researcher sent a calendar invitation once the participants selected the interview date and time. Six candidates chose to participate in the interview and selected the interview mode. All six interview sessions were conducted virtually and were the participants' preferences, as they identified in the recruitment survey. Interview sessions ranged from 50 to 75 minutes.

Standard methods used to collect data in qualitative research include interviews, participatory observations, focus groups, document reviews, and questionnaires (Ravitch & Carl,

2021). For this study, the researcher will use semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed via *Zoom*. The researcher's laptop, including an audio recording and transcript, was used for the Zoom interview sessions. To protect participants' privacy, pseudonyms were assigned to participants for use in all interview notes and transcripts. The researcher listened to the audio recordings multiple times to check the accuracy of the transcripts and made necessary changes based on the participants' spoken words. Additional transcript accuracy checks were conducted using participant validation, also known as member checking (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). During this process, the researcher emailed each participant a copy of their transcript within 24 hours of the interview session to verify its accuracy and meaning (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). All interview audio recordings were deleted after participants verified that the transcripts were accurate.

Data Analysis Procedures

Ravitch and Carl (2021) described qualitative analysis as an intentional and methodical examination of the data collected at various stages of the study. They explained that the data analysis process is iterative and recursive. It relates to all aspects of qualitative research and should be investigated in isolation at one summative moment in the study. The authors recommended a three-pronged process of data organization and management, immersive engagement with the data, and writing and representation.

Qualitative data analysis is an iterative and recursive process that includes gathering and analyzing data at the same time, making notes during data collection and analysis, categorizing data into themes and patterns, using writing as an analytical tool, developing analytical ideas and concepts, and connecting the analysis to previous literature (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Coding is the process researchers use to categorize the data into themes and patterns (Saldaña, 2016). Ravitch

and Carl (2021) described coding as assigning meaning to the collected data. Saldaña (2016) considered coding as assigning a word, phrase, or code to symbolically capture the essence or attribute of a group of words or visual data. Using coding, the researcher can organize the data into categories or themes that inform the study's findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Each transcript was analyzed for this study using an emic focus and an inductive approach (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Schutt, 2022). It is recommended using the inductive coding approach for exploratory research in which a study is done to generate new theories, ideas, or concepts (Schutt, 2022). Inductive coding allows the narrative or theory to emerge from the raw data as a discovery process that finds significant categories present in the data and patterns and correlations between the categories (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Schutt, 2022).

For this study, the researcher analyzed multiple transcripts to develop levels of codes during the inductive process (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Each transcript was coded using the constant comparison method (Dye et al., 2000). The constant comparison coding strategy involves the researcher conducting multiple readings, chunking (i.e., reducing information/data into smaller 'chunks' during the analysis process), and coding each transcript. After each read and coding, the researcher compared codes, which were then categorized and reorganized based on emerging patterns and themes (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

The first read of the data transcripts involved field notes to support the researcher in understanding and making meaning of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). During the second read of the data, the researcher utilized the open-coding method, highlighting sections of the transcripts and labeling them with a word or phrase code (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The third read included coding the data to identify, track, organize, and

recategorize recurring codes across data sets (Saldaña, 2016). The fourth read included organizing the data into themes and sub-themes with the codes from each transcript. In the fifth reach, the researcher identified three overarching themes of the study and nine subthemes organized by each research question. Multiple reads and the use of coding identified initial categories. Revising and recategorizing codes assist the researcher in identifying patterns and themes that were reported in the study's findings (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Participant Confidentiality

Protecting the well-being and privacy of participants was accomplished throughout this study by assigning pseudonyms, securing and limiting access to audio recordings and transcripts of interviews, and destroying audio and interview transcripts once the study was complete. This research fully complied with the ethical and professional guidelines of the University of North Carolina-Charlotte's Institutional Review Board. Participants receive an Interview Consent Form (Appendix D) (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

This study presented minimal risks to participants as it did not expose them to physical or psychological harm or experimental treatment. The researcher provided verbal and written notification during the study to ensure all interviewees understood that participation was voluntary. There were no penalties if participants withdrew at any point. Participants were notified in the informed consent form that they would not receive the incentive if they withdrew before the interview was completed. No participant withdrew before the interview was completed. To protect participants' confidentiality and/or potential conflicts of interest, the researcher did not provide identifiable information from participants to the participant's school, school district, or the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. This information was communicated to each participant at the beginning of the study.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to a study's quality and rigor (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Researchers have identified four areas to demonstrate trustworthiness in a qualitative study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 2003; Maher et al., 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Shenton, 2004). Credibility assures that the study assesses what is supposed to be measured and that the results accurately represent participants' social reality (Maher et al., 2018). A researcher must authentically represent the phenomenon being examined based on the data collected (Shenton, 2004). In this study, the researcher confirmed the credibility of the research in the data collection process by ensuring the sample population met the study's criteria requirements. In addition, a field test of the interview protocol was conducted prior to the use of the protocol. During the field test, the researcher asked qualitative subject matter experts to assess research questions and interview questions (Bagdady, 2020). In addition, the researcher received feedback from my committee on the interview protocol. Their feedback was considered and used to improve the interview protocol (Bagdady, 2020). Audio recordings and field notes were also utilized during each interview and transcription.

Though the results of qualitative research cannot be generalized in the same way that quantitative research results can, qualitative research must nonetheless have some degree of external validity. Transferability in qualitative research is addressed by including an adequate description of the fieldwork context that enables readers to evaluate if the study environment and findings can be transferred to other settings (Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Shenton, 2004). The researcher implemented all the methodological processes discussed in this chapter to provide the transferability of this proposed study. In addition, the researcher gave detailed and rich

descriptions of the participant's perceptions of academic tracking and its influence on instructional decisions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Dependability in a qualitative study refers to its reproducibility. Thus, the study's write-up should include a detailed account of its design and implementation (Maher et al., 2018; Shenton, 2004). To ensure the dependability of this study, the researcher provided a detailed account of the research design and implementation, including the sample population criteria, data collection instruments, data collection technique, and data analysis process. This makes it possible for the research design to be employed in future research but also lends credibility to the study because it demonstrates adherence to qualitative research methodologies (Shenton, 2004).

Confirmability in qualitative research relates to objectivity in presenting the findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Researchers are responsible for demonstrating that their findings originate from the facts and not from their preconceptions about achieving this in their work (Maher et al., 2018; Shenton, 2004). To ensure confirmability in this study, the researcher presented their positionality statement, which is their connection to the research, and described what (if anything) must be suspended to achieve objectivity (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The researcher utilized member-checking to ensure that the researcher's interpretations were not biased by personal factors (Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Shenton, 2004). The author used field notes and intercoder reliability to ensure the study's confirmability (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Shenton, 2004).

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that only African American high school principals from one region of North Carolina school districts were selected as the sample population. Therefore, findings from this study might be less transferable to principals of other ethnicities, grade spans,

or regions. The researcher chose this sample population to investigate because principals may racially identify with marginalized student groups who are most negatively affected by academic tracking and to understand the implications such practices have on their instructional decisions. Another possible limitation is that the participants might be reserved in their responses because the researcher has a professional relationship with several participants because the researcher has worked in one of the selected districts for almost 20 years as a school leader and in the district office.

As qualitative case study research relies on thick, rich descriptions, it was very important for the researcher to create an environment where participants could openly share their perceptions and experiences of academic tracking. Thus, it was necessary for the researcher to effectively communicate that each participant's identity in the study would be kept anonymous except to the researcher and their faculty advisor if needed. In addition, identifiable digital and hardcopy information was securely stored during the study and will be destroyed six months after its completion.

Summary

Chapter 3 provided a detailed description of the methodology of this exploratory case study. This study included a study announcement, a recruitment survey, and semi-structured in-person or *Zoom* interviews with six African American high school principals to understand their perceptions of academic tracking and its influence on instructional decisions. The researcher used an inductive constant comparison method to analyze the data. The next chapter will present the findings of this study.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This exploratory qualitative study delved into the perceptions of African American high school principals regarding academic tracking. It also sought to shed light on the participants' perceptions about the impact of academic tracking on instructional decisions and students' learning outcomes. Specifically, the objective of this qualitative study was to answer the following three research questions:

RQ1. What are the perceptions of African American high school principals concerning academic tracking as a school practice?

RQ2. How do African American high school principals believe academic tracking influences instructional decisions at their schools?

RQ3. What are the perceptions of African American high school principals of using tracking on student learning and self-efficacy?

In this chapter, the recruitment survey methods and the rigorous process of establishing codes, categories, and themes through data analysis are described. The information gathered from the initial survey is presented as a comprehensive description of the six principals and their qualifications to participate in the study. Pseudonyms were used for the six participants and their school sites to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. After completing each of the six semi-structured interviews, the interview was transcribed and read for initial understanding. Following my first reading of each transcript, I conducted member checking by emailing each participant a copy of their transcript to review for accuracy and verify the content and meaning (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Once participants verified each transcript was accurate, I used Microsoft Word to do an initial coding of each transcript, assigning a word, phrase, or code to symbolically capture the essence or attribute of a group of words or visual data (Saldaña,

2016), thereby assigning meaning to the collected data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Chunks of the interview data and their codes were pulled and sorted in a Microsoft Word table to form broader categories. Next, I identified themes that were then turned into thematic sentences, making meaning of the chunked categories data (Saldaña, 2016). In addition, themes and findings are elaborated according to the research question; the chapter ends with a summary and a transition into Chapter 5.

Recruitment Methods

The recruitment survey was created using Google Forms and consisted of five sections with seven questions. The design allowed interested participants to provide their names and email addresses. Also included in the form design was the option for the survey to advance to the end, after question four, if the participant did not identify as an African American. The 15 respondents to the recruitment survey represented twenty percent of the eight North Carolina regional school districts. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the recruitment survey response frequency for the six participants who completed the study.

Table 2

Frequencies of the Six Participants' Recruitment Survey Questions

	Response Frequency	
Question		
1. Are you a licensed North Carolina K-12 Principal?	6 (Yes)	0 (No)
2. Select your current administrative role.	6 (Principal)	0 (Assistant/Vice Principal)
3. How many years have you served as a high school Principal?	0 (Less than 1 year) 0 (4-6 years) 4 (11-15 years)	0 (1-3 years) 1 (7-10 years) 1 (16-20 years plus)

Table 2

Frequencies of the Six Participants' Recruitment Survey Questions (continued)

4.	What is your ethnicity?	6 (African American) 0 (Asian) 0 (White) 0(Two or more races)	0 (American Indian) 0 (Hispanic) 0 (Pacific-Islander)
5.	Do you self-identify as an Instructional Leader?	6 (Yes)	0 (No)
6.	If you agree to participate and meet the criteria, please provide your first and last name that I may contact you.	6 (names were entered)	0 (empty email slot)
7.	If you agree to participate and meet the criteria, please provide your email address so that I may contact you.	6 (emails provided)	0 (empty email slot)

Participants Summary

Six of the 10 recruitment survey respondents accepted the interview request, returned the consent form, and participated in the study. The population studied in this research comprised African American high school principals in North Carolina. All participants in the study have been principals for more than seven years. From an investigation standpoint, the population was relevant to this research study and was significantly connected to the problem statement.

Table 3 shows cumulative descriptive statistics for the six participants who completed the interview, which was conducted at their choice virtually on Zoom in the spring of 2024. Participants spanned three years of experience brackets; however, most were within the 11-15 years of experience. Regarding race, all participants had to meet the criteria of the specific racial group, African American, to be included in the study. Sixty-six percent of participants were female, and thirty-four percent were male. All six participants self-identified as instructional

leaders. Five of the six participants lead traditional comprehensive high schools with grades spanning 9-12, with student population sizes ranging from 1400-1900 students, of which the majority of the student bodies were African American and Hispanic. The five schools offered a range of magnet and advanced courses along with the core course of the study program. Students graduating from these five high schools can earn diplomas and certifications in various Career and Technical Education programs. One participant leads a small middle college school, serving 11th and 12th -grade students. The student population is slightly below 200. Students enrolled in this school can earn a high school diploma and an associate degree from the local community college.

Table 3

Participants Statistical Summary

Description	Frequency out of 6 High Schools	Percentage
Principal Experience		
7-10 years	1	17
11-15 years	4	66
16-20+ years	1	17
Race		
African American	6	100
Gender		
Male	2	66
Female	4	34
Self-identified as an Instructional Leader	6	100
School Type		
Traditional HS (Grades 9-12)	5	83
Middle College HS (Grades 11-13)	1	17

Table 3

Participants Statistical Summary (continued)

School Programs		
Advanced Placement	6	100
Cambridge	1	17
International Baccalaureate	2	34
Honors Courses	6	100
Other Magnet Programs	2	34
School Student Population Count		
<200	1	17
1500-1600	1	17
1600-1700	1	17
1800-1900	1	17
1900-2000	2	34

In addition to cumulative data, individualized descriptions of each participant are included. These explanations provide more context, depth, and subtlety regarding information derived from participant responses. Tables 3-4 reference participants' data.

Participant 1 (Kenneth) has been a principal for over 11 years. He has been principal of his current school for four months. Kenneth leads a traditional comprehensive high school, grades 9-12, with over 1500 students. His school's student population racial demographic is 54 percent African American and 34 percent Hispanic, with all other student racial groups (Whites, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian, and Two or More Race) representing the remaining 12 percent. His school offers various course options, including performing and fine arts, advanced placement, honors and non-honors courses, and a Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps

program. Kenneth was a district leader before returning to lead a school, thus bringing a unique perspective to his leadership.

Participant 2 (Matthew) has been a principal for over 14 years. He has been the principal of his current school for approximately a year and a half. Matthew currently leads a traditional comprehensive high school, grades 9-12, with approximately 2000 students. His school's student population includes 71 percent African American, 20 percent Hispanic, and the remaining eight and a half percent includes four racial groups: Whites, Asians, Two or More races, and Pacific Islanders. Matthew's school offers a variety of course programs, such as several Career and Technical Education pathway courses (Culinary Arts, Cosmetology, and Health Sciences), advanced placement, honors, and non-honors courses.

Participant 3 (Rachel) has been a principal for over 13 years. She has been principal at her current high school for four years. Rachel currently leads a traditional comprehensive high school, grades 9-12, with approximately 2000 students. Her school student population includes 59 percent African American, 29 percent Hispanic, a little over six percent White, and the remaining six percent is a combination of the following student racial groups: Asian, Two or More Races American Indian, and Pacific Islander. Rachel's school offers students courses from three magnet programs: International Baccalaureate, World Language Academy, and Career and Technology Education Industry, as well as advanced placement, honors, and non-honors courses. Rachel's school pulls students from two different cities, urban and suburban communities.

Participant 4 (Renee) has been a principal for over 11 years. She has served the last six years as principal at her current high school. Renee currently leads a traditional comprehensive high school, grades 9-12, with approximately 1860 students. The student population includes 45 percent African American, 25 percent White, 22 percent Hispanic, and the racial groups Two or

More Races, Asians, American Indians, and Pacific Islanders comprise the remaining eight percent. Renee's school offers students a range of course offerings, including the Cambridge program and Junior Reserve Officers' Corps program, as well as advanced placement, honors, and non-honors courses.

Participant 5 (Tamica) has been a principal for 18 years. She has been serving as the principal at her current school for eight months. Tamica currently leads a non-traditional Middle College high school, grades 11-13, with a population of 176 students. The student population includes 46 percent African American , 26 percent Hispanic, 13 percent White, eight percent Asian, and seven percent Two or More Races. Advanced and honors courses are the only course pathways at Tamica's school. Students can graduate with both a high school diploma and an associate's degree.

Participant 6 (Melissa) has been a principal for over eight years. She has been serving for just over two years at her current school. Melissa currently leads a traditional comprehensive high school, grades 9-12, with a student population of over 1600 students. The student population includes 61 percent African Americans and 29 percent Hispanics, with the racial groups White, Asian, Two or More Races, American Indians, Pacific Islanders, and Unknown, making up the remaining 10 percent. Melissa's school is a full magnet program that offers students a wide range of academic courses and programs in the nine Career and Technical Education program pathways, some of which are Engineering, Health Sciences, and Automotive, as well as advanced placement, honors, and non-honors courses. The school serves a county magnet program that pulls students from across the county.

Table 4

Participants' Individual Data: Gender, Years Administrator, Years at Current School, School Type, School Programs

Participant /Gender	Years as a Principal	Years at Current School	Type of High School	School Program Offered	Student Population Demographic by Percentage
Kenneth Male	11-15 years	4 mths	Comprehensive High School (9-12)	Performing Arts Print Art AP Courses Honors Courses Non-Honors Courses JROTC	54-AA 34-Hisp 4.6-White 4.2-Asian 2.7-2+races 0.3-Amr.Ind 0.2-Pacf.Isl
Matthew MAle	11-15 years	1year, 5 months	Comprehensive High School (9-12)	CTE Courses AP Courses Honors Courses Non-Honors Courses	71-AA 20-Hisp 1.9-White 3.2-Asian 3.2-2+races 0.1-Pacf.Isl
Rachel Female	11-15 years	4 years	Comprehensive High School (9-12)	CTE Courses IB Program World Languages Program AP Courses Honors Courses Non-Honors Courses	56-AA 31-Hisp 6.3-White 3.6-Asian 2.6-2+races 0.2-Amr.Ind 0.1-Pacf. Isl
Renee	11-15 years	6 years	Comprehensive High School (9-12)	Cambridge Program AP Courses Honors Courses Non-Honors Courses JROTC	45-AA 22-Hisp 25-White 3.0-Asian 4.6-2+races 0.1-Amer.Ind 0.1-Pacf.Isl
Tamica	16-20+ years	8 months	Middle-College High School (11-13)	AP Courses Honors Courses	45-AA 26-Hisp 13-White 8.2-Asian 7.1-2+races

Table 4

Participants' Individual Data: Gender, Years Administrator, Years at Current School, School Type, School Programs (continued)

Melissa	7-10 years	2 years, 2 months	Traditional Comprehensive High School (9-12)	CTE Courses AP Courses Honors Courses Non-Honors Courses	60-AA 29.3-Hisp 3.0-White 4.0-Asian 2.7-2+races 0.3-Amer.Ind 0.3-Pacf.Isl 0.1-Unkn

Note. AP = Advanced Placement. JROTC = Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps. CTE = Career Technical Education. AA=African American. Hisp = Hispanic. Amer.Ind = American Indian. Pacf.Isl = Pacific Islander. Unkn = Unknown.

Codes, Categories, and Themes by Research Questions

After completing the six participant interview sessions, transcriptions from the Zoom audio recordings were retrieved and downloaded. I followed the data analysis process for each transcription separately, reading the transcript multiple times to familiarize myself and review the data for accuracy. To enhance accuracy and validity, each transcript was sent to the participant (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Microsoft Word was then used to organize the data analysis process. Transcripts were copied into the first column of the Word document and the second column for descriptive codes. Next, I employed a coding system that analyzes each transcript line and develops descriptive codes (Saldana, 2016). To explore the data more deeply, the descriptive codes were copied into a new Word document of six columns, one for each participant set of descriptive codes by research and interview questions. I followed an inductive coding process. Each transcript was coded using the constant comparison method of comparing and reorganizing the data, identifying categories and patterns (Dye et al., 2000). Data were then sorted into conceptual categories and emerging themes (Saldana, 2016). Next was the process of

condensing and merging categories until themes apparent themes emerged. Another Word document was created to organize the themes and subthemes using research questions, which included descriptive codes. Next, I reread the themes, descriptive codes transcripts, and color-coded chunks of the data from the participants' comments, with each color representing each participant's statements that supported the themes and subthemes.

The participants' perceptions of academic tracking and its impact on their instructional decisions and students' learning outcomes and self-efficacy varied significantly. This diversity of perspectives added a layer of complexity to the research, making the data analysis process intriguing. Despite these variations, the data analysis revealed several themes related to each research question. These themes and their connected subthemes are described in the following sections and noted in Table 5.

Table 5

Themes and Subtheme Related to Research Questions

RQ1: What are the Perceptions of African American High School Principals Concerning Academic Tracking as a School Practice?		
Theme 1: Academic Tracking is the Practice of Academically Categorizing and Separating Students into Learning Groups		
Subtheme	Main Category: • Category Codes	Number of Codes
	Academic Tracking: • Definition/Description	36
Theme 2: Academic Tracking Practices are the Results of Adult Decisions		
Subtheme	Main Category: • Category Codes	Number of Codes
Leaders Internal Conflict with Tracking Practices in their School	Academic Track a "Double Edge Sword": • To Track or Not to Track?	45

Table 5

Themes and Subtheme Related to Research Questions (continued)

Multiple criteria determine Student Track Placement	High School Track Placement Practices: • Track Placement	47
Theme 3: Academic Tracking Creates Different School Experiences for Students		
Subtheme	Main Category: • Category Codes	Number of Codes
	Effects on Students: • Benefits of Tacking for Students • Adverse Effects of Tracking for Students	65
RQ2: How do African American High School Principals Believe Academic Tracking Influences Instructional Decisions at Their Schools?		
Theme 1: Academic Tracking, a Significant Influencer on Instructional Decisions		
Subtheme	Main Category: • Category Codes	Number of Codes
Students Learning Need Drives Tracking Influence on Instructional Decisions	Instructional Programs and Climate: • Master Schedule • Allotment Funds and Resources • High Track Course Enrollment • Teacher Course Assignment • Instructional Practices	101
Beliefs Shape Tracking Impact on Instructional Practices	Instructional Expectations: • Principal Beliefs and Expectations • Teacher Beliefs Instructional Practices • Principal Actions Based on Beliefs	57
Theme 2: Racial Identity Shapes Tracking Influence on Instructional Decisions		
Subtheme	Main Category: • Category Codes	Number of Codes
	Learning Experience: • African American Students	38
RQ3: What are the Perceptions Of African American High School Principals of Using Academic Tracking on Student Learning and Self-Efficacy?		
Theme 1: Academic Tracking Has Significant Impact on Student Schooling		
Subtheme	Main Category: • Category Codes	Number of Codes

Table 5

Themes and Subtheme Related to Research Questions (continued)

	AP Students: • Participation	28
Tracking Impact Learning Outcomes Varies by Student Group	Tracking Impact LO by Student Group: • Track Level • Impact by Race • Impact by Socio-Economic Status	73
Tracking Impact Student Self-Efficacy Varies by Student Group	Tracking Impact SE by Student Group • Impact by Track Level • Impact by Socio-economic Status	41
Theme 2: Autonomy to Change Academic Tracking Practices		
	Change Agents: • Change School Structure • Change Narrative/Beliefs/Mindset	18

During the interview, participants were asked 11 questions to address the study's three research questions (Appendix C). Within the context of each research question, several themes emerged that were specific to each question. Three of the questions addressed Research Question 1, with three themes emerging from participants' responses. Two interview questions addressed Research Question 2, with four themes emerging from participants' responses. Six interview questions addressed Research Question 3, with two themes emerging. The themes and subthemes for each research question are described in the following sections.

RQ1. What are the Perceptions of African American High School Principals Concerning Academic Tracking as a School Practice?

The first research question examined how African American principals perceive academic tracking as a school practice. Data analysis assessed the principals' perceptions of

academic tracking and its definition and description. The analysis also examined academic tracking practices implemented at participants' schools and their perceptions of academic tracking as an effective school practice.

Academic Tracking is Academically Categorizing and Sorting Students

While descriptions varied slightly, all six participants generally defined academic tracking as assigning students to specific courses with a determined academic pathway or learning level based on the perceived learning abilities of students. This led to the first theme, *academic tracking is the practice of academically categorizing and separating students into learning groups*. Participants described this learning pathway as rigid in its design because once students are placed within a particular pathway, they tend to remain in it throughout their high school career. They also explained that these learning tracks are typically assigned by school staff or determined by a parent or family member but are rarely the student's choice. Sorting students into different academic levels based on a predetermined set of requirements was consistent in all participants' definitions. Additionally, participants asserted that categorizing and sorting students into different learning groups based on the perceived academic abilities of the students enables schools to customize learning. Renee described academic tracking as “a way to meet students where they are; it is taking your academic curriculum and dividing it into certain academic levels for designated students typically based on data.” As Tamica noted, [f]rom my experience around academic tracking, it is identifying who should take accelerated classes, and then those students take accelerated classes, you know, throughout their experience.”

Along with sorting students into different academic levels, three participants also discussed the permanent nature of academic tracking for students. Kenneth's description of academic tracking captures this concept of track-permanency, sharing:

> That is where you put well, depending on the student's achievement level, allowing them to take specific courses or be enrolled in certain classes. And then they stay on that track. They go from one course to the next level course, to the next level of the course, without the opportunity to get out of that track.

Melissa also discussed the permanency of academic tracking: "It is classifying who your AP students are, who your standard students are, who your honors students are … just based off of my previous experiences those students get tracked or pigeonholed into the tracking system for them."

Participants defined and described academic tracking as categorizing and sorting students into relatively permanent academic learning pathways. Participants agreed that once students are placed on an academic track, they often remain on that track throughout their high school tenure. Based on the pattern in the participants' responses, I concluded that the high school principals perceived academic tracking school practice as sorting students into a set learning pathway that is often a permanent placement.

Academic Tracking Practices are the Results of Adult Decisions

All participants strongly believed that academic tracking practices within their schools were a direct result of school staff or parents' decisions and not those of students, leading to the theme that *academic tracking practices are typically the results of adults' decisions*. Participants noted that staff members' perceptions of students' academic abilities influenced their decisions and practices that kept students on the same academic track for their entire high school career. This caused participants to feel conflicted with academic tracking in their schools, as they saw both the benefits and unintended consequences.

Leaders' Internal Conflict with Tracking Practices in their School

All participants expressed feeling conflicted about academic tracking, which resulted in them struggling with the decision to track students. Participants generally described both the benefits and the unintended consequences of academic tracking. They argued that tracking provides focused academic support to some students, which fosters a positive learning environment for some students. They also believed that tracking benefits teachers by creating a manageable teaching environment. As Renee stated, they believed "tracking has its place in education." However, participants argued that they also saw the unintended consequences of academic tracking on students, which caused them to second-guess their decisions to implement the practice. Participants discussed that a significant concern they have with tracking practices is students' limited opportunity to take courses of their choice because of the restrictive nature of each track course pathway. They also described that tracking creates a negative learning environment for students.

Five participants believed academic tracking provides positive support for some students in their school. Specifically, they believed that tracking leads to curricula and instructional activities designed to meet the needs of students with varying levels of achievement. Rachel illustrated this commonly held viewpoint: "[i]f students have low test scores coming in, we put in foundations math and literacy, it gives time to master content." Several other participants suggested that tracking fosters a focused learning environment that prepares students for college. They advocated placing students on a higher track above their academic ability and putting academic support in place to prepare them for college. Kenneth stated, "[s]chools should put students on a higher track and put the support to push and develop students to be on the higher track." Renee emphasized that focused academic support for students in higher tracks fosters

college readiness. She stated, “We push students into higher tracks with support to get students ready for college and life.”

Four participants acknowledged that academic tracking makes instruction more manageable for teachers, providing instructional convenience. Classes comprised of students with similar levels of academic readiness and outcomes were easier to manage instructionally than learning groups of differing academic levels. They explained that some teachers need to gain the skills to manage different learning groups, and tracking allowed them to provide instruction to students on the same instructional level. When describing the instructional convenience academic tracking provides for teachers, Tamica stated:

> It is helpful for an instructional purpose. If I have students who are working at a certain zone of proximal development, and I am trying to help them advance, sometimes it is helpful to work with students at a particular level who are all at the same level but with the expectation of trying to bring them up—not for them to stay there and constantly be in the low group, but to be able to advance them.

Rachel agreed that tracking supports instructional convenience for teachers. She stated: “There are some benefits in some ways for instruction. I think it is a little easier to tailor to students when you have students on the same level and ability.”

However, participants described experiencing cognitive dissonance when implementing academic tracking because of positive and negative outcomes. On the one hand, they saw benefits related to students' learning needs and college and life readiness. However, they also described the unintended consequences of academic tracking. Specifically, they described tracking as limiting student access and opportunity to take advanced courses. Tamica expressed

her conflict with tracking, noting educational benefits and limits on students' choices. When describing the benefits of tracking, she stated:

> From a benefit standpoint, it can help students get what they need at their level. And I think you know, helping kids understand that's why they're in that track. We're here cause I'm trying to reach you where you are so that you can move. So, I think those are some of the benefits of that can be helpful. Sometimes we don't always do a good job of articulating.

Tamica also expressed that academic tracking practices create a barrier to students' access to courses outside of their academic track. She stated, "It limits students' course choices and flexibility to take classes they are interested in." Tamica recounted an experience with one of her students that provided context to the unintended consequence of track placement on students. Tamica explained:

> I had one student who came and met with me who did not meet the threshold, but she came and did a whole presentation for me on why she needed to be in that advanced math course, and I put her in there. She did great. She got an "A," so she was ready for it. So sometimes I would say that we can have these parameters in place and use them with good intent, but they also can have the unintended consequence of tracking the students who could do well.

Tamica further explained that she is working to decrease such consequences. She noted, "We are working not for it to be finite tracking practices. We encourage students to have access to rigorous courses. We are breaking down those tracking practices." Rachel presented similar views about her duality of beliefs when implementing academic tracking practices in her school noting:

> It is double-sided when it comes to things like that. I will give you some experiences. When you have students who come in who may have scored a level 1 or 2, and we put them into foundations of Math 1 and maybe foundations of English 1, it does give students more time with the content; however, you also limit students' choices and what courses they can take.

Rachel emphasized that tracking negatively impacts students' school experience. She shared a story about one of her students that denoted the impact of tracking on their school experience. She stated:

> I encountered a student when I was an assistant principal at another high school; this student was in the 11th grade. They were a student that historically had performed pretty low. We tracked them into foundational classes: Foundations of Math 1, Foundations of Math 2, Foundations of English 1, and Foundations of English 2. When they got to the 11th grade, I asked him, what do you like in school? What coursework have you done that you have enjoyed? He did not have anything that he could tell me. Part of that was because I, as a school leader, had chosen a list of foundational courses for him so that he had no opportunity to even think about what might interest him. It shocked me because I thought we were doing the right thing to support students. In actuality, you have developed someone who has no idea of a plan for what he might want to do, does not understand, and does not have a preference for anything that he enjoys in high school. Thus, I do not see that as a positive that this student could not tell me anything they enjoyed based on the experiences we have chosen for him so far. So, while it can support, it also hinders people's ability to determine a path, which is what high school is for.

Participants expressed conflicting perspectives about academic tracking practices in their schools because they believed there were benefits and negative consequences. Participants believed academic tracking allowed some students to get tailored instruction to meet their learning needs; it provided instructional convenience for teachers teaching students at the same instructional level. However, they also explained that academic tracking poses barriers to students' access to courses outside of their academic track, thus causing negative learning experiences for some students. Despite their conflicting views on academic tracking, all participants described various academic tracking practices in their schools that were the direct results of adults' decisions.

Multiple Criteria Determine Student Track Placement

When asked about the placement of students, all participants described using multiple criteria to determine students' academic tracks. These criteria included school staff recommendations, prior assessment scores, prior course history, students' grades, and parents' requests. While a few participants discussed students requesting to be placed in a particular class, those instances were infrequent and were seldom honored. Participants mentioned using, on average, three to four criteria when determining students' track placement. While participants could account for multiple criteria for track placement, they expressed concerns that track placement practices were inconsistent, with no standard practice used in their schools and across schools within their district.

All participants detailed the multiple criteria they employed when determining student track-level placement. Rachel discussed that her school's track placement practices were based on students' learning needs; she described her practice as "based on what their post-secondary plan is how we kind of create a path for students… it is also, based on what we determine

students' needs are." Matthew stated that his track placement criteria included academic factors, parents, and student requests. He explained: "We use students' test scores and parents' requests." Matthew was the only participant who mentioned that track placement at his school also included the student's request. He went on to describe his perception and experience with track placement practices:

> Honestly, that starts in elementary school because students take standardized tests from the state of North Carolina, whether that's the EOG or in upper grades the EOC, in the course which is taken high school courses, and based on how scholars perform on those assessments dictate what type of classes you can take. So, a lot of classes have prerequisites. So, in order for you to take certain classes, you have to meet specific qualifications, and truthfully, tracking starts then… so parents can opt into the courses. Even if the data says your child does not qualify for a specific course.

Tamica described her track placement practices as "an application process. There was a writing process … based on EOG scores and teacher feedback, the teachers had to make a recommendation."

Despite establishing placement criteria, participants strongly expressed that track placement criteria were used arbitrarily within their school and district. Rachel, Renee, Tamica, and Melissa argued that inconsistent placement practices often created inequities by limiting students' access to higher track levels. They noted that inconsistent placement criteria contribute to some students getting "pigeonholed" in a lower track while others are placed in higher tracks. Renee illustrated the participants' views of the impact of inconsistent use of track placement practices:

> Academic tracking, in my definition, is a way to meet students where they are. It is taking your academic curriculum and dividing it into certain academic levels for designated students, typically based on data. Our practices, however, are not as consistent, probably, as they need to be across the board. So, we end up, I think, sometimes hurting students versus helping them. … and when I say across the board, there are no consistent data points that we use to say when a child should take a certain course or type of course. Typically, what I found is that we have, unfortunately, started to default to what's convenient for the schedule. So, students who should be challenged are not sometimes challenged or the opposite. We're pushing students into courses that really are not there yet, and we end up muddying the water sometimes in the higher-level courses.

All participants reflected on their leadership actions to counteract the inequity of student track placements. For the most part, participants noted they became advocates for students' placement into higher tracks. Participants discussed strategies for engaging students, teachers, and parents in conversations about student placement in higher track courses, putting academic supports in advanced classes where they enrolled students with lower academic achievement, and encouraging rigorous instruction in lower-level courses to increase student achievement. Matthew spoke about his role as an advocate for student track placement. He stated:

> When I think about academic tracking, I serve as an advocate, especially for some of my students who don't have an advocate at home or don't have a parent or guardian who's really involved in investment education. So, that's what I'm trying to do to help influence that academic tracking in a positive way.

Matthew also noted that his advocacy goes beyond just putting students on higher tracks, and he described establishing academic support to ensure their success in the course. He stated:

> Once scholars are in those classes, help them to be successful, and make sure you have opportunities for them to get access to tutoring. … using my Title 1 funds to purchase extra support staff for those scholars and using those funds to secure additional instructional resources.

Kenneth also explained that he advocated for students to take higher-level courses. He stated: "Students can perform at high levels … we can push them, develop them, and support them in a way that they end up taking a course that would not be in the traditional track they came in on." Kenneth further explained that for school staff to take actions to move students from the low to high track would require creative thinking and using criteria such as perseverance and work ethics alongside academic requirements. He commented:

> We have to look at some of those intangibles that students bring, that perseverance, that work ethic, that capacity, and not so much their grades, their test scores, because test scores alone and grades may not truly give the picture of what a student can or cannot do.

Participants described the multi-criteria approach used to determine students' track placements. They also expressed concerns about the inconsistent practice of track placement within their schools and districts. They argued that arbitrary track placement criteria create disadvantages for some students by limiting their access to higher tracks and rigorous learning. Participants explained that as school leaders, they advocated for placement in higher tracks, mainly when capable students lacked solid parental support. Participants strongly believed it was their responsibility to ensure students were placed on the track that best meets their learning needs.

Participants spoke passionately about adults' roles in determining academic tracking practices in the school, including the decision to implement academic tracking and the placement

of individual students. They struggled to decide whether to use academic tracking in their schools because they could see the advantages and unexpected repercussions. Participants elaborated on the role school personnel or students' families played in deciding student track placement and the multi-criteria factors used for track placement. Finally, the participants discussed how decisions and practices that maintained students' academic progress throughout their high school careers were shaped by the perceptions and behaviors of school staff regarding students' academic potential.

Academic Tracking Creates Different School Experiences for Students

All participants believed academic tracking affected students' learning experiences differently, leading to the theme that *academic tracking creates different school experiences for students*. They emphasized that there were benefits and detriments to students' learning experiences due to tracking practices in their schools. They discussed personalized instruction, rigorous instruction, increased student motivation, and students' increased confidence as benefits of tracking students. When discussing the benefits of tracking in his school, Matthew stated, “Kids who gain access to higher tracks where they may not have gained access before have an opportunity to have a different experience and be exposed to some things they would not have experienced.” On the other hand, participants argued that tracking adversely affected students’ learning. They described a segregated learning environment, lower teacher expectations, and academic failure as some of the adverse effects of academic tracking on the school experiences of students in lower-track courses.

Participants advocated that when done correctly, academic tracking benefits learning. They expressed that having students in the same learning zone within a track enables teachers to develop personalized instruction for students. When describing this view of personalizing

instruction to meet students' learning needs, Tamica stated that the “goal of tracking should be to target students' academic needs.” She continued, “Tracking benefits students by giving them what they need at their track level.” Renee emphasized that having a strong understanding of students' learning needs is critical in making tracking effective in personalizing student learning. She noted, “An effective practice only when we really know the student and their ability level… We must be strategic and know the students we track and place in courses. But there are benefits.”

In addition to personalized instruction as a benefit of tracking students' learning needs, participants also discussed the benefits to students' social-emotional well-being. Participants described students having increased self-confidence and motivation from being in classes with students with similar learning abilities and skills. They explained that when students are surrounded by like students, they are inspired by each other, and this then propels and motivates them to learn and perform at higher levels. Renee captured the views of participants when she stated, “Academic tracking can inspire and propel a student… higher-level classes can build students' confidence.”

Four participants also discussed the adverse effects of academic tracking on students, emphasizing that tracking created segregated learning environments. Participants contended that tracking created a segregated learning environment by having students in different learning tracks. They described observing students receiving different learning experiences within each track. Tamica’s statement best captured this concept as she shared an experience at a previous school, “When I was an elementary school principal, we had kids who were identified as gifted, right? And then they had a certain experience, and oftentimes, that experience could be somewhat segregated compared to what other students are getting.” In addition, participants

explained that it was difficult for students to grow within the segregated learning environment, especially in the lower tracks. They explained that students on the lower track did not learn from their peers who also had low achievement, as in the case of a mixed-ability class. Rachel described her experiences with homogenous ability grouping. She stated:

> What I have seen in my experiences is that when you have classes full of students with the same ability level, sometimes it is difficult for students to grow, see exemplars, and learn from their peers. … And students need to see exemplars, and they need to see work, not just set by their teacher, but what their peers are doing also.

Participants were also concerned that incorrect placement in an academic track can lead to poor academic outcomes. They described situations when the desire to increase participation in advanced courses failed some students. Renee discussed that knowledge of student performance levels is essential to student success in a track. She said, “It is effective only when we really know the student and know their ability level. It becomes ineffective when we do it rushed or to get numbers up, … and they still do not pass those courses.” Additionally, she cautioned that students' repeated failure in courses they are not academically prepared to take leads to students getting off track to graduate on time:

> I have seen that part, too, where we put students who show a two on the EOG, but in the ninth grade, they are in Honors World History or Honors English 1 courses and fail those two courses. Now, we hurt them to jump and start their high school careers, and they are already behind. Unfortunately, some of their past or lack of academic success is because we push many students into higher courses without prior knowledge being established for them. Therefore, they end up really struggling in the classes.

Beyond getting off track to graduate on time from high school, participants explained that academic failure also leads to students having lower self-image or self-concept. Tamica provided an example of how putting students on a higher track when they are not academically prepared can negatively impact their self-image. She said:

> I think you can track students to high levels where they feel insufficient, do not feel like they can take a class for enjoyment, or do not always feel like they must be so high achieving. So, I think it is a practice that we always have to be interrogated because it has harmful effects, and it can have very harmful effects, particularly for Black and brown students.

Renee also discussed her experience with a student who lost confidence when he did not perform as he expected in a higher-level course she had encouraged him to take. She explained that the student was discouraged and did not want to take another higher-track course as a result:

> I remember a student in the ninth grade. He was just an outgoing man. Great personality. He was in all standard courses. He was 'on the bubble,' and I challenged him to take just one high-level course, and he took the one. He did okay in it, maybe a low B. When it came time to register for his tenth-grade classes, he would not take another one. He begged me not to register him in another one; he said, 'I do not want to take honors English. I do not want to take that. I do not want to take honors English.' But I do think he should have stayed on that path. I think it would have helped him continue to build his confidence and grow, but he did not want to take another one.

Melissa also described how tracking practices negatively affect students' confidence. Here is how she described her students' experiences:

> In our case, when we are tracking, we are tracking up to ensure that we are pushing all of our students. So, every student has the opportunity to take an AP course, but specifically, being strategic and getting those students that are not. For whatever reason, they are afraid of it. They are afraid that their GPA is going to drop.

Four participants offered solutions to counteract students' incorrect track placement and academic failure. They advocated having a skilled teacher who can teach students with varying academic abilities. They suggested that a teacher who believes the student can be successful is the key to improving the student's academic success no matter the academic track.

Overall, participants described academic tracking as the practice of categorizing and sorting students into specific classes based on their academic abilities and skills. They perceived that the academic tracking practices in their schools resulted from adult actions and decisions, specifically when determining track placement. Participants passionately expressed their conflict with academic tracking as a practice. They described the benefits of tracking but also believed that academic tracking creates different learning experiences for students in different academic tracks.

RQ2: How do African American High School Principals Believe Academic Tracking Influences Instructional Decisions at Their Schools

RQ2 examined how African American principals believed academic tracking influenced instructional decisions such as school instructional structures, master schedules, allotment of funds and resources, student enrollment in advanced courses, teacher course assignments, and instructional practices. In addition, the analysis also examined whether the principals' racial identity affects their instructional decisions about academic tracking and their perceptions about

whether academic tracking benefit some groups of students more than others. Two themes that emerged from the data analysis are described in the following sections.

Academic Tracking, A Significant Influencer on Instructional Decisions

All participants strongly believed that academic tracking influenced their instructional programs. Students' learning needs are at the focal point of their instructional decisions, leading to the subtheme that *students' learning needs drive how tracking influences instructional decisions.* Participants also contended that their beliefs and their staff's perceptions about students' abilities at the various track levels determine how tracking influences instructional expectations, practices, and staff actions, establishing *beliefs shape the track's impact on instructional practices* as a subtheme. As a result of participants' perceptions of how academic tracking influences instructional practices and decisions regarding instructional programs, I developed the overarching theme, *academic tracking, a significant influencer on instructional* decisions.

Student Learning Needs Drive Tracking Influence on Instructional Decisions

All participants perceived instructional leadership as one of their primary functions as principals. As instructional leaders, they work to ensure that the school's instructional program meets all students' learning needs. Participants explained that academic tracking influences their instructional decisions because of the multiple track levels of their students and their desire to meet all student's learning needs. Participants explained that academic tracking impacts decisions about the master schedule, allotment of funds and resources for the various track levels, how teachers are assigned to various courses in the different track levels, student enrollment at the various track levels, and instructional expectations and practices at their schools.

Tracking: Impact on Master Schedule

All six participants discussed how tracking impacted the master schedule, and the learning needs of students were at the core of the schedule. They also discussed how many courses are needed at each track level based on students' prior performance and the courses students need to complete the track pathway. To this point, Kenneth stated, “We look at where students are performing. What is the next course they need? We try to offer a program that will support students but also push them.” Participants mentioned needing more courses at the lower track, especially in math, because their incoming student data indicated that more students performed lower in math. Matthew illustrated how the lower academic performance of incoming ninth grade students affects his master schedule:

> When I think about academic tracking for rising ninth graders, let us say, for example, in either English or math, most of the schools that feed my high school are low-performing. So, most of my scholars from those schools are low-performing. Hence, they must be in a year-long English 1 and a year-long Math 1 instead of a semester. So, the more year-long English and Math classes I have, the more teachers I need. That means I do not have as many teachers to teach semester-long courses. So, it does impact your master schedule, and you have to be very creative.

Kenneth expressed that tracking not only influenced how many courses he needed at the lower- and advanced-track levels:

> Some other things that may influence tracking are how many advanced placement courses we offer in our master schedule. If our students are not performing at a high enough level, we may eliminate courses that would not have enough students taking the course. Those are the kinds of things that will influence our master schedule.

Tamica and Melissa were outliers regarding tracking impact on their master schedule. They articulated that tracking did not significantly impact their school master schedule because all classes offered at their schools were either honors or AP courses. Tamica stated, Tracking does not affect the master schedule, because we prioritize students' needs." Later in the interview she also stated, "All students take honors and advanced courses." This was interesting viewpoint since honors and AP courses are considered high track courses.

Tracking: Impact on Allotment of Funds and Resources

Five participants concurred that tracking impacts how they use their allotment of funding and resources, such as instructional materials and human resources. They described using most of their funding to hire teachers and tutors to reduce class sizes, especially in the lower-track foundational courses. Rachel discussed how funds are used to create smaller class sizes to support students:

> I think classes where students are tracked to have the most needs need a smaller class size. This means you may have to look at your allotments, and if you are making smaller class sizes, there will be a sacrifice somewhere… For example, we have done some of that and not had enough to provide a separate teacher to teach IB math, Math 2, and Honors Math 2. So, we have had to pair them to provide more support in math.

Participants commented that tracking also impacts how they allocate instructional materials. To this point, Matthew stated, "We also use funds to purchase instructional material. I can think about some of my AP courses. We purchase additional resources for those teachers to use within the classroom and for the scholars."

Tracking: Impact on Teacher Course Assignment

All six participants perceived that tracking affected the assignment of teachers to specific courses. They concurred that their students with the most significant learning needs should have the teacher with the most excellent teaching pedagogy and content knowledge. Kenneth said, “We want the best teachers with the most challenging students.” Melissa, Renee, Kenneth, and Rachel discussed adjusting teacher assignments accordingly and the strategic placement of teachers to support students’ academic achievement.

In addition to student learning needs driving teacher course assignments, two participants explained that teacher interest should be considered when making such decisions. They argued that when teachers’ interests and students’ needs are considered when making teaching assignments, a more positive learning environment is created. Rachel explained, “I believe teachers should teach what they are interested in. When we match it with teacher interest, the teacher will perform better in teaching, and students will feel that experience.”

Tracking: Impact on Student Advanced Course Enrollment

Five participants perceived that tracking impacted students' enrollment in advanced courses. They argued that teachers' beliefs about tracking and students' abilities drive their recommendations for course placements and encouragement to enroll in advanced-level tracks. Participants explained that staff recommendations are among the most used student track placement criteria. Rachel described this phenomenon, stating, “We solicit teacher recommendations for placement of students in Advanced Placement courses, who they think can be successful, not just using the student's prior grades.”

In addition to placement recommendations, participants suggested that teacher beliefs about students' abilities influence their discussions with students about future enrollment in advanced courses. Kenneth's captured the essence of this point. He stated:

> The systems in place cause staff to talk or not talk to students about Advanced Placement classes. Teachers in standard-level classes do not talk to students about taking honors or Advanced Placement courses a contributing factor to why students in standard-level classes do not participate in advanced courses. In contrast, teachers in honors and Advanced Placement classes talk to students about taking additional Advanced Placement courses.

Participants discussed educating teachers about students' “intangible” skills, encouraging students to take at least one Advanced Placement course, and dual enrollment in college courses at the local community college as strategies for increasing student advancement course enrollment. However, as Melissa described, it is a challenging process: “It is a constant push. Our goal is for students to take at least one AP class and continue until they feel they hit a wall. We also push dual enrollment, which gives students more choices.”

All participants believed that students' learning needs should be the center of instructional decisions. They noted that tracking influences their instructional decisions as they attempt to provide an effective and equitable learning experience for all students. Additionally, they perceived that teachers’ beliefs about tracking and students’ abilities shaped instructional practices.

Beliefs Shapes Tracking Impact on Instructional Practices

All participants agreed that academic tracking influences instructional practices, and this influence was shaped by teachers’ beliefs about students' abilities. Participants described a

significant difference in their instructional expectations versus the reality of the instruction delivered by teachers. Participants explained that they expected instruction to be rigorous and consistent across all academic tracks. These expectations were grounded in their beliefs that all students should have the same opportunities to learn and succeed. However, participants explained that was not the reality of what they observed in teaching practices at their school. Participants emphasized, as articulated by Kenneth, that "tracking should not impact instruction, and teaching is building relationships and meeting students where they are academically and should be the same in every class." Melissa also advocated that instructional practices should be consistent across all levels, but that has not always been her experience. She describes an experience:

> From my previous experience with academic tracking, I found that when you had those three levels when we had separated the levels of our students, you saw the instruction looked very different in the classroom. It should not, but it did. Furthermore, again, that is where our goal is. My goal is to work with the teachers and coach teachers to ensure that we are increasing that level of rigor for all the students. So, they are getting the same exposure because they will have to take the same assessment in the end.

Participants further discussed their expectations that teachers should teach all students with high levels of rigor based on student's strengths and needs. Renee noted, "I expect all teachers to teach to students' strengths and needs." Melissa confirmed this instructional expectation when she commented, "The expectation within the classroom is that we are going to teach at a high level of engagement and high levels of rigor for our students."

Rachel added a unique perspective on how tracking can positively and negatively influence teaching practice. She stated, "Academic tracking affects instruction; when students

are on the same level, it makes instruction easier." On the other hand, she argued, "It can become a self-fulfilling prophecy if students are tracked in lower classes; then that is how they will perform."

The six participants noted that the reality of teaching practices they observed in classrooms was starkly different from their expectations. They believed this disparity resulted from teachers' beliefs about students' abilities influencing their instructional practices. Kenneth explained his experience with how some teachers' beliefs appear to influence how they teach students in the lower-track, foundational courses:

> Teachers believe lower-level students need foundational teaching to build their skills, not higher-level teaching… If a class has low-performing students, teachers will not push that class to grade level or above grade level work; they would tend to teach to that lower level.

Renee expressed similar beliefs about her perceptions of teachers teaching lower foundation courses. She explained that teachers perceive teaching students in lower tracks to be more difficult. Renee explained:

> Teachers see Math 1 as a course requiring much planning and support because the students are low-performing… Teachers ask not to teach low-performing math students, do not want to teach struggling students, and believe teaching lower-level students becomes a nightmare.

Participants explained that they coached teachers on instructional strategies to increase rigor and student engagement. Melissa described some of her leadership actions as including coaching and encouraging teachers:

> Our goal is to work with teachers and coach them to increase the level of rigor for

all students. We preach to teachers that we need high levels of engagement for all students, especially since they are getting honors credit for the course.

Matthew and Kenneth explained that their leadership actions entailed coaching teachers on strategies to teach lower-track students at a higher level. Overall, participants perceived their leadership actions to improve instructional practices in their school as a complex process that they needed to solve. To this point, Rachel stated, “We need to figure out how to accelerate leaning towards grade level for lower students.”

Participants spoke candidly about the significant influence academic tracking has on their instructional decisions. They made decisions based on trying to meet students’ needs in various tracks. Participants also perceived that teachers’ beliefs about students' academic abilities in the different tracks shaped instructional practices. Specifically, participants perceived teaching practices in the lower tracks were less rigorous and engaging than in higher tracks. As a result, participants sought to enhance rigor and engagement in lower-track classes by coaching teachers.

Racial Identity Shapes Tracking Influence on Instructional Decisions

Five of the six participants perceived their racial identity as African American shaped their beliefs and actions about academic tracking. This led to the theme of *racial identity shapes tracking influence on instructional decisions*. They emphasized their racial identity's impact on how they viewed the academic tracking of their African American students. They voiced that as Black students in America, they had school experiences similar to those of their African American students.

Participants described how their racial identity influenced their decisions to create opportunities for African American students to move from lower tracks into higher tracks, believing that doing so would enhance students’ experiences. As Rachel expressed, “I want to be

a person who creates opportunities for students. Spark not extinguish, especially for African American Students." Renee explained, "I want to use my knowledge and passion for my students of color to inspire and help our students." Melissa commented that her racial identity influenced her desire to move students to higher academic tracks. She explained:

> I have pulled some of my students and moved them into upper-level classes. And where the teacher may not have been on board and did not quite understand why we were doing this. I fully believe that some of our students do not have the same opportunities or somebody in their corner who will push them to their full potential. I truly believe that if students know we have high expectations for them, they will perform and go above and beyond. But if they sense that we do not have any expectations for them or have low expectations, they will give us what they think we assume from them, which is low expectations.

Tamica's statements described the participants' sentiments about providing a positive experience for students. She stated:

> From my experience as an African American principal, I am cognizant of what our kids need and ensure that Black and Brown students are not just categorized in a certain area. That is one of the reasons why I am really energized by being where I am. Because I am seeing, you know, all students thrive in this environment, regardless of their appearance. Yeah, I think that is it. I cannot pinpoint anything specific about being an African American principal that has impacted my decisions other than, you know. It is important to me that our kids have positive experiences in the school environment. That we are not perceived as the lowest, and that we have access to all opportunities. Everyone, other students in our district or the school environment, has a positive experience.

Matthew had a unique perspective as a veteran leader who had been a principal for over 14 years at several school levels. Matthew believed it was his years of experience as a principal not his racial identity that influenced his perceptions and practices regarding academic tracking in his school. His perspective came from his years of leadership and the trust he believes his supervisors have in his ability to lead. He said:

> I think it has more to do with the time I have been a principal. I think, being new as a principal, I would answer that differently than now, almost 15 years as a principal. I have more autonomy and trust from my area supervisor to make decisions or try different things without asking. Whereas if you had asked me ten years ago, the response would have been different.

Kenneth and Renee described how their racial identity influenced their instructional decisions, noting specific concerns about the learning needs of Black male students. Kenneth explained that his negative experience as a Black male who was tracked in high school shaped his perceptions about tracking. He stated:

> I do not like tracking because I would have stayed on the track folks felt I was on in high school. I would not be where I am because I remember my twelfth-grade teacher telling me and the other Black boy in the class, ‘Y'all ain't gonna’ make it in college.'

Kenneth further commented about his racial identity's influence on tracking and instructional decisions:

> I think it is important because I bring our perspective of an African American male who is in leadership in a school where they are the lowest-performing group academically. I am trying to discuss strategies for how teachers connect with students like me and engage with students who look like me. It is something that I think I give a unique perspective on

> because I have been there as an African American male sitting in a high school class. And so, I try to share that experience in hopes that teachers will get something they could use to connect with students to engage them in the curriculum.

Renee discussed similar concerns about African American males in her school and how her racial identity influences instructional decisions:

> In an ideal world, I want to use my knowledge and passion for my students of color to inspire and help our students. But the reality is that as an African American principal, many students, how do I say this? A lot of the students are not learning and not making substantial academic progress. Our children of color. When you look at all the data, African American males are the group that's not making consistent academic progress. So, I now find myself thinking with that mindset when I am talking to teachers, when we are making decisions about the master schedule, and when we are making decisions about courses to offer. How do I move this group of students? How do I move my foundation's students? How do I excite them about math? How do I excite my Black males about school? How do I get them excited about reading? What class can we create? We had this discussion the other day because we were short and lost some allotments.

Renee further explained how she engages with her staff to inform instructional decisions about students in different tracks. She stated:

> We are talking about tracking our low, level students, our less motivated students, our African American males… The current conversation we are having now as a team is about how we create academic learning experiences that can positively impact our African males who are less motivated and are lower-level students. And at the same time,

how do we ensure we are pushing our higher-level students upward? It is not easy, easy. I am not going to say dismiss our high-level students.

Participants believed their racial identity shapes their views about how academic tracking impacts the experiences of African American students. As African American principals, they felt responsible for ensuring African American students had the same experiences and opportunities as other students. They aspired to create a positive learning environment for all students, specifically African American students who are predominantly placed in lower-tracks and receive substandard learning experiences.

Overall, participants concurred that academic tracking practices impacted their instructional decisions. This impact was significant and spanned the scope of their school's instructional program. They also perceived that teachers' beliefs about academic tracking and students' abilities shaped instructional practices. Additionally, they acknowledged that their racial identify shaped their beliefs about tracking and the learning experiences of their African American students.

RQ3. What are the Perceptions of African American High School Principals of Using Academic Tracking on Student Learning and Self-efficacy?

The third research question addressed participants' perceptions about how academic tracking impacted students learning outcomes and self-efficacy. In addition, RQ3 analyzed if participants perceived they had the authority to change institutional structures such as academic tracking in their schools. RQ3 revealed two distinct themes presented in the following sections.

Academic Tracking Significantly Impacts Students' Schooling

As participants discussed their perceptions about academic tracking's impact on students' learning outcomes and self-efficacy, they detailed numerous examples of its impact across

various aspects of their school, leading to the theme that *academic tracking significantly impacts students' schooling.* Participants had varying perceptions of which students were impacted and the type of impact. However, they all concurred that tracking practices were strongly related to students' educational experiences and their participation in advanced-level courses. In addition, participants believed the impact of tracking varied by students' track level, racial identity, and economic status, resulting in different student learning outcomes and levels of self-efficacy.

All participants described how academic tracking impacts student enrollment in advanced-level courses. While all participants described a predominantly Black and Hispanic student body, three participants noted discrepancies between their student body's racial makeup and advanced course enrollment. Kenneth's description of his AP course enrollment captures this dynamic. He stated, "Upper-middle-class students take AP and honors." Rachel and Renee reported that while their student body is 90% African American and Hispanic, those numbers do not transfer to student advanced-course enrollment. Rachel commented, "Majority White students in the International Baccalaureate (IB) classes." Renee made a similar statement regarding enrollment in her Advanced Placement classes, stating, "Whites and Asians are the majority in Advanced Placement classes." By contrast, Tamica and Melissa reported that their school programs support diverse enrollment in advanced-level courses regardless of race and socio-economic status. Melissa stated, "All economic and racial groups take advanced programs in my school."

Participants believed teachers' influence and family/cultural values were two key factors contributing to the discrepancy between the racial makeup of their student body and advanced course enrollment. To this point, Matthew stated, "If teachers make students believe in

themselves, students will do great in academics." He later explained how families influenced student course enrollment:

> What are economic and racial groups for us? It will be African Americans or Hispanics. But when I think economics, these are going to be the ones that are higher up the ladder with social economics because some of our families have had exposure to college, whether Mom or Dad and they know how to navigate the educational system or call a counselor. They know how they know many things. There is open access. You cannot say my child cannot be in honors. So, they know how to engage in those conversations. Because of this, their child is taking upper-level courses, whereas someone who comes from a family that's not like that would not know how to.

Renee argued a similar view about the influence of family on students' enrollment in higher-track courses. She stated:

> High-performing students' families expect them to take advanced courses. Other racial groups, such as African Americans, just want to pass; they do not care to take advanced courses. African American students feel advanced courses are too hard and too much work, so they take lower-level classes.

Rachel described how she believes students' cultural values influence their higher-level course enrollment. She stated:

> I think the why is layered, and there are many reasons. But I do not think it is that other groups do not value education. I think that historically, the method that has been set up for American success is college. This is the path that people have taken, and White people have taken advantage of that pathway.

All participants held that academic tracking significantly impacted their students' enrollment in advanced courses. They perceived teacher and family cultural values influenced those enrolled in advanced-level courses in their schools.

Tracking: Impact on Students' Learning Outcomes

Participants described a relationship between academic tracking and student learning outcomes. They argued that the impact of tracking practices on students' learning outcomes varied by students' track level, racial identity, and socio-economic status, leading to the *subtheme tracking impact on students' learning outcomes.*

Participants reported a strong relationship between students' track level and their school experience that was influenced by teachers' beliefs about students' abilities and skills in lower-track courses. Participants perceived a significant difference in students' experiences in the low-track and high-track classes. They believed that tracking led to negative school experiences for students in the lower-track foundational courses and positive school experiences for students in higher-track, honors, and advanced courses. These different schools' experiences result in different student learning outcomes by track level.

In some cases, participants described students in the lower tracks as having fewer opportunities to experience enrichment activities, such as attending field trips and guest speakers. Participants argued that because lower-track teachers sometimes have lower expectations of their students, they do not provide them with the same enrichment activities offered to students in advanced courses. When describing this phenomenon, Matthew commented, "There is a positive school experience for higher-track students, like field trips. He further argued, "Lower-track students have less access to courses, and there are more course choices for higher-track students." Regarding low teacher expectations of students in lower-track classes, Renee

explained that “this was because teachers had low expectations for lower-track students, which impacts their school experience more than we realize.” Renee continued to explain, “Teachers believe lower-track students do not listen and require too much work on the teachers' end to teach labs to students.”

Melissa and Tamica emphasized track placement permanency as adding to lower learning outcomes for students in lower tracks. Melissa explained her perspective when she stated:

> Academic tracking affects students' experience, especially struggling students. They see and know how students are grouped, and it embarrasses them. They do not like school. They know they are in the group that cannot read. As they move up in grade and track for longer periods, pulling them out of that track in middle and high school is hard. Its impact is negative for the lower track.

Melissa and Renee added two unique perspectives about tracking impact on student track level. Melissa was the only participant who felt tracking had a negative impact on students at the higher levels. She stated that tracking could negatively affect students in higher tracks. She commented, " Some higher levels have negative impacts. It is burnout at the high track. They feel they cannot disappoint, make errors, earn ‘Bs,’ and make poor grades.” Renee was the only participant who explicitly identified the special needs students with unique educational learning plans as a student group adversely impacted by academic tracking practices. The special education track level is considered a lower track. Renee argued, “I think it is negatively impacting African American male students. African American students and special needs students.” She added that a teacher's ability to teach students in lower tracks impacts students' learning outcomes; she stated, “Sometimes, the teacher's quality can also significantly impact

helping students feel like they can do it and be successful; and being ready for the next level of learning."

Matthew argued that teachers' level of experience influences the track level they get to teach, thus causing an impact on the learning outcomes for students in different tracks. He stated:

> I have been in places when I was not the principal. I know some of the best staff, meaning staff with National Board certifications, multiple masters, and several years of experience; they get access to what they would consider to be the exclusive classes, the IB classes, the AP classes, the honors classes, and then your newer teachers, your inexperience teachers teach the low-level classes. If a school is designed that way, it will impact outcomes. One would say people with more experience and education have more strategies in their tool belts to pull from to move kids versus somebody who is brand new.

In addition to teachers' low expectations impacting students' low-track learning outcomes, participants stated that teachers' beliefs created a self-fulfilling prophecy. Kenneth commented:

> Teachers make assumptions about students in tracked classes. High-track class teachers believe kids can go to college, and low-track teachers might not believe they can. If the school believes students do not have potential, then students' school experience is not good. If the school and teachers believe students have potential, then students feel encouraged and do well.

He added, "High-track teachers push students to learn because they believe they can do it. Teachers' beliefs of academic tracks drive low-track teachers not to push students because they do not believe the kids will do better." Rachel concurred with this point of view about the

impact of a teacher's self-fulfilling prophecy on students' learning outcomes. She commented, "It goes back to students rising to teachers' expectations." She proposed the strategic pairing of students and teachers as a solution to change learning outcomes for students in lower tracks. She stated, "Students in the low track must be paired with teachers who have the mindset that students can do… teachers who believe in them, that they can learn at high levels."

All six participants argued that academic tracking had varying effects on students of different races. They argued that White and Asian students benefited positively from tracking practices, while it had adverse effects on African American and Hispanic students. While most of the schools in the example were over 90% Black and Latino, of those that were not, participants stated that most of the students in the higher tracks were White and Asian students, and Black and Hispanic students were predominantly in the lower tracks.

Renee and Tamica perceived that tracking positively benefited White students. Tamica captured this point of view: "Tracking has a more positive impact on White students, which is like the larger society." Regarding the harmful effects of tracking on students from different racial groups, Renee stated, "Tracking is negatively impacting African American male students more than White students." Tamica supported Renee's argument when she stated, "Tracking has more negative impact on Black and Brown students… because Black and Brown students are in the lower track classes." Tamica further explained that limited higher course access was the rationale for her beliefs. She stated:

> Black and Brown students do not have access to advanced coursework, and they are not getting opportunities to be pushed, which is like Black and Brown students in the district. In the district, Black and Brown students do not have access to grade-level content and do not see academic progress.

Five participants perceived that academic tracking impacted students' learning outcomes differently based on their socioeconomic status. They argued that students in upper-middle and middle-economic groups benefited most while harming students in the economically disadvantaged group**.** To this view, Kenneth contended:

> I think that is one way that tracking may influence the kind of conversation and messages students will hear from their teachers and those from economically advantaged classes. Most of our AP classes would include economically upper-middle-class students, who may receive a different message. Students in the upper-middle class hear positive messages about going to college, so they believe they can go to college.

Renee added similar comments that tracking benefited students' learning outcomes in the "higher track, academically strong Caucasian middle-class students, Black, White, and Hispanic students."

Kenneth argued that tracking adversely affected economically disadvantaged students in the lower track. From this perspective, he stated:

> You would see that students who are classified as middle to upper middle class would be in the more advanced placement courses, while students who may be economically disadvantaged would be in more of your foundational and standards courses. … I cannot say I am 100% certain, but in our standards or foundational classes, they are not getting a message of college beyond high school.

Tracking: Impact on Students' Self-Efficacy

Five of six participants believed that tracking impacted learning outcomes and added that there is a strong relationship between academic tracking practices and students' self-efficacy. They emphasized that the impact on students' self-efficacy varied by students' track level and

socio-economic status. They argued that students in the higher-track courses had greater self-efficacy, and students in the lower-track track had lower self-efficacy. They stated that peer motivation and teacher encouragement positively influence students' self-efficacy in higher tracks. Participants also argued that the permanent nature of tracking and teachers' low expectations of students in lower tracks contribute to students' consistently low performance and failure, thus resulting in students in lower tracks having low self-esteem and self-efficacy than their peers in higher tracks.

Renee discussed peer motivation as a benefit to higher-tracked students' self-efficacy, stating, "High-performing students get motivated by other high-performing students, and they continue to improve as a result." Matthew, Rachel, and Kenneth emphasized that students in higher-track courses received encouragement from their teachers to succeed academically. To this viewpoint, Matthew stated:

> Students in upper-track classes always get told they are smart and college-bound… Students in higher tracks feel good about their self-esteem. They feel they can conquer the world because this has been spoken to them repeatedly. Students are often told that they are smart and believe they are smart, so they start to take on what they are told.

Tamica advocated that students' academic success in higher tracks contributes to increased self-efficacy. She stated, "Tracking impacts self-efficacy positively if students see their learning gap being filled and they are starting to learn."

In addition to voicing the positive effects tracking has on higher-tracked students' self-efficacy, participants also described the harmful effects of tracking on lower-tracked students' self-efficacy. Tamica stated, "Tracking impacts self-efficacy negatively if students feel they are not smart. If students are stuck in a low-performing track and are never pushed out of that track,

it harms their self-efficacy." Tamica advocated that as a solution, teachers should help build student's self-efficacy. She stated: "If teachers help students build self-efficacy, telling them they can do it." Rachel commented about students on the lower track and the impact of tracking on their self-esteem: "It can also be a crab in a barrel effect for students. Students say I am in the 'slow' class, so the students internalize that." Melissa commented about students in the foundation's course, a low track in her school. "Foundations students have issues with self-efficacy." She argued this as a solution: "It is building their confidence to feel they can do it."

Kenneth was the only participant who commented that academic tracking impacted students of various socioeconomic self-efficacy differently. He stated:

> Economic disadvantages students in lower track do not get told about college after high school, so they do not think about college. The teacher's message makes students believe what they can do after high school, go or not go to college.

Overall, participants perceived that academic tracking practices significantly impacted students' learning outcomes and self-efficacy. They believed the impact varied according to the track level, race, and socio-economic status. Overall, participants concurred that tracking positively impacted learning outcomes and self-efficacy for students in the higher tracks, who were predominantly White and Asian and in the middle to high socio-economic status. By contrast, it harmed Black and Hispanic students, who were predominantly in lower-tracked courses and lower socio-economic income range.

Autonomy to Change Academic Tracking Practices

As all participants described academic tracking practices' impacts on their students' learning outcomes and self-efficacy, they confidently asserted they had the authority or autonomy to change academic tracking practices in their schools, leading to the theme of

autonomy to change academic tracking practices. Participants described implementing structural changes and changing staff mindsets and beliefs about tracking as avenues they would implement to change tracking practices at their schools. Structural changes some participants discussed included master schedule design, course enrollment practices, and developing cross-school level teams with their elementary and middle feeder schools.

Participants also passionately discussed being the change agents in their schools. They believed it was their responsibility to change the narrative of tracking and beliefs of the staff. They advocated challenging teachers about their beliefs about students' abilities and skills, specifically at the lower track levels.

Both Kenneth and Matthew expressed that they perceived they had the autonomy as principal to implement structural changes to eliminate tracking practices in their schools. Both believed being a veteran principal provided them with the knowledge and experience needed to change academic tracking practices in their schools. Matthew's statements captured the essence of this perspective, he stated:

> So, this goes back to my earlier response. I have over 11 years as a principal and 25 years in education. Look! If they want to fire me, so be it. I will do what I want to do in the kids' best interests. So, my response is different than it would have been ten years ago. I have been more cautious. Now, I will do what I believe is right, for instance, what we did recently. We are in the middle of registration for next school year. So, I had a report pulled based on the GPA of my different grade levels. I had my counselors target certain kids who are not in AP courses; they have never taken an AP course, so talk to them and have conversations about their need to take an AP Course. And that is not something I

have to do. That is not something that the district demanded that I do. But that is something I know is right.

Regarding establishing a cross-functional school-level team with feeder schools, Matthew further explained:

> So, I had my Math 1 PLC do vertical planning at one of our feeder or middle schools because it has to go beyond the walls of my school if we are going to make this. I have to do more with the partnership and collaboration between me and my middle schools. You know. It goes down, to, more with accountability, and you know I hate to push it down. But it is just true: I need elementary schools to be better. Middle schools can be better so that the kids coming into me are at grade level. It is just a domino effect. But that is what I am doing in my piece of the world to try to impact those academic outcomes for the kids I serve.

Rachel, Tamica, Melissa, and Renee emphasized changing the master schedule as the structural change they would make as a strategy to change tracking practices in their school. Rachel reflected this group's point of view when she stated:

> I believe that high schools have more flexibility than elementary or secondary schools. So, in my position, I believe that if I wanted to, for example, which I have thought about doing, I would have all my English 1 classes be IB, English 1, everybody has to conform to a particular system, but it gives the impression that we are all working on rigorous coursework. We all have a focus. It does not have to be that they must be in Foundations of English 1, but that they are in IB English 1. I feel like we have more flexibility in doing that in high school. So, I think that one is not as hard for me. I could have all my

> English 3 classes be honors if I want to. I do not have to say you have to be in Standard English. So, I think you have more flexibility in high school courses than in lower grades.

Some participants perceived a need to change teachers' mindsets about tracking in addition to structural changes in tracking practices. To this point, Renee noted:

> Let me say I have the power to limit specific courses or certain practices that would hinder the progression of our track. Let me say this differently. I do have the power to shift how we use academic tracking and how it negatively impacts students. I do not think eliminating certain classes is the answer. I think it goes back to the authority to talk about how. So, I do not know if institutional structures are as important as institutional mindsets.

Participants voiced that changing people's mindsets would change the narrative of academic tracking, thus leading to a change in academic tracking practices in their schools. They perceived it was their responsibility as school leaders to change the beliefs and mindset of teachers about tracking practices. They noted it would be difficult to change their teachers' beliefs about students at various track levels; however, they believed it necessary to have consistent and crucial conversations with their staff about focusing on students' potential and intangible skills, not just their scores and academic performance. Kenneth's statements capture this viewpoint. He stated:

> I know the gray areas and that crucial conversation that must be had. I also believe in students and their abilities and look at the intangibles for persevering through challenging situations… I know that has to be a conversation instilled in staff and reflected upon staff to ensure that they are looking at students' potential and not where they are. I believe I have some influence as the principal. I have worked in the district office, as a teacher, an

> assistant principal, and a principal, and I believe that the principal position is the most influential position in a school. They set the tone, the level of expectation, and the accountability. The principal is a critical lever in student outcomes.

Matthew's statements concurred with Kenneth about changing his staff perceptions and beliefs about students who take AP, higher track classes:

> … There is still a perception that these types of classes, AP classes, are exclusive to a specific type of kid. And I am trying to change that narrative that you do not have to look a certain way, talk a certain way, or act in a certain way to access advanced classes. That really bothers me, and we have had a conversation recently with my administrative team about it. It really bothers me that a freshman only gets one choice of an elective, a freshman that is below grade level. That really bothers me. So, we are already discussing how to change this narrative.

Academic tracking significantly impacts students' education, and principals believe they have the autonomy to change academic tracking practices within their schools, which are two themes that emerged from RQ3. Participants argued that academic tracking positively and negatively affects students' education based on race, track levels, and socio-economic status. They argued that tracking positively affected White students, students in advanced track levels, and students in the middle to high socio-economic group. Conversely, tracking had adverse effects on African American students in lower track levels and students from lower socio-economic status. Participants linked the adverse effects of academic tracking to gaps in students' learning outcomes and self-efficacy.

Despite the level of implementation and effects of academic tracking practices presented by participants, they all perceived they had the autonomy to change academic tracking practices

in their schools. Several participants explained that they are working to implement changes, focusing on structural and cultural aspects.

Summary

This chapter detailed how participants responded to the study's three research questions. Research Question 1 addressed the African American high school principals' definition of academic tracking and their perception of tracking as a school practice. Emerging themes were academic tracking, which is the practice of academically categorizing and separating students into learning groups, which were the results of adults' decisions, and tracking led to different school experiences for students. Each participant describes how the beliefs and actions of school staff determined student track placement practices. Participants also expressed conflicting feelings about academic tracking as they saw the benefits and adverse effects on students' learning experiences.

Research Question 2 considered the African American principals' perceptions regarding academic tracking's influence on their instructional decisions. Emerging themes were that academic tracking significantly influenced their instructional decisions, and their racial identity shaped how tracking influenced instructional decisions. All participants explained that students' learning needs were paramount in how tracking impacted instructional decisions such as the master schedule, advanced course enrollment, teacher course assignment, allocation of allotment, and instructional pedagogy. Four of the six participants expressed that their racial identity influenced how tracking influenced their instructional decisions. In particular, two of the four participants focused on instructional decisions concerning Black male students. Two participants perceived that their years of experiences had more influence on how tracking impacted instructional decisions than their racial identity.

Research Question 3 focused on the African American principals' perception of how academic tracking impacted students' learning outcomes and self-efficacy. Two themes emerged: academic tracking significantly impacted student schooling, and the principals perceived they had the autonomy to change academic tracking practices in their schools. All participants expressed that tracking impacted student learning outcomes and self-efficacy. However, the impact varied by students' track level, race, and socioeconomic status. All participants passionately stated they perceived they had full autonomy to change tracking practices in their schools. Participants described these changes as either school structural changes in school systems or changes in the beliefs and practices of their teachers and school staff.

The next chapter presents a summary, discussion, and implications of the study findings of African American high school principals' perceptions of academic tracking and its impact on instructional decisions, student learning outcomes, and self-efficacy. The chapter also includes recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

This chapter summarizes the problem, purpose, methods, and ethical components of this research study. It then presents a detailed discussion of each research question's findings with connections to existing literature. The chapter concludes by discussing the implications and recommendations for future practice, policy, and research related to academic tracking practices and their impact on principals' instructional decisions.

Equity in education has been a central concern and subject of educational reform in politics, law, and academia. In the fight to offer equal education to the country's increasingly diverse student population, school districts have implemented various tactics, programs, and school structures (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). One such tactic was ability grouping, which first appeared in the early 20th century and is referred to as academic tracking in secondary grades (Oakes, 1986b). Based on perceived ability, ability grouping divides students into homogeneous learning groups (Kulik, 1992; Lindle, 1994). School personnel divide students into ability groups based on test results, recommendations from teachers and counselors, and other student records (Kulik, 1992; Oakes, 1986b).

Proponents of academic tracking argue that the approach facilitates education by personalizing the learning process and enabling teachers to modify lesson plans for varying class levels (Gamoran, 2017; Hallinan, 1994; Kangas & Cook, 2020; Oakes, 2005). In this way, the needs of high performing students and students with special learning needs are met through personalization of instruction. Furthermore, proponents support the idea that all students can become more self-assured in their ability to learn because they are not unfairly compared to more gifted students (Gamoran, 2017; Hallinan, 1994; Kangas & Cook, 2020).

However, not everyone sees tracking's structure in such a positive light (Kulik, 1992). Several studies have criticized ability grouping and academic tracking in secondary schools (Akos et al., 2007; Benson et al., 2020; Chambers, 2009; Slavin, 1990; Stanley & Chambers, 2018), their research (Akos et al., 2007; Benson et al., 2020; Callahan, 2005; Chambers, 2009; Stanley & Chambers, 2018; Werblow et al., 2013) has revealed some long-term adverse effects associated with these practices on students. These effects, including lower teacher expectations, lower academic achievement, career aspirations, higher dropout rates, and lower adult wages, underscore the urgent need for reform. Other studies (Benson et al., 2019; Terrin & Triventi, 2023) have shown that classrooms with a tracking system are now heavily associated with a student's success or failure. Despite these findings, principals in schools that employ student tracking face the challenge of making equitable instructional decisions for all children, given the success disparity among White, Asian, Latino, and African American students (Riegle-Crumb & Grodsky, 2010). Therefore, the problem that this research study sought to address involved the crucial but overlooked perceptions of principals regarding academic tracking practices and their impact on their instructional decisions.

Every student should be able to develop intellectually so they are equipped for life through education. In order to do this, more in-depth research needs to be done on instructional strategies like student tracking. This study aimed to ascertain how African American high school principals felt about academic tracking. The researcher's specific aim was to comprehend how the implementation of academic tracking impacted school principals' instructional decisions.

This exploratory qualitative study utilized interviews completed virtually via Zoom. Participants were allowed to conduct the interviews in person or virtually, and all participants selected the virtual medium. Fifteen African American principals responded to the social media

posting by completing the recruitment survey and indicating an interest in participating in the study. Only six of the original fifteen survey candidates opted to complete the study. The researcher sent each participant a Google Form to select their preferred interview date, time, and medium of choice. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, and interview transcripts were shared via email as part of the member-checking process. The recruitment survey information, interview transcripts, and member-checking responses provided the data sources to assist the researcher with developing findings.

According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), researchers must approach, comprehend, and carefully analyze their responsibilities and positionality to comply with ethical considerations in every study. It is also critical to consider participants and the idea that researchers should conduct their studies with their best interests and public welfare in mind (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Since the researcher placed a high value on time and responses of participants throughout the study, it was always her intention to consider and act upon any criticism from the dissertation committee and the IRB procedure to guarantee the security and well-being of every participant. This research fully complied with the ethical and professional guidelines of the University of North Carolina-Charlotte's Institutional Review Board (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

The researcher ensured care and caution regarding minimal risk to participants in the study by informing participants in writing and verbally about the study's voluntary nature through informed consent. Furthermore, there was little danger for the volunteers because there was no exposure to experimental treatment or bodily or psychological injury. Participants were not penalized for choosing to leave the study at any time or for not taking part in any section of the interview. In order to maintain participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to each

participant, and all information about them was kept private and was not disclosed by the researcher to either the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) or the participants' schools or districts. The University of North Carolina at Charlotte provided safe cloud storage for all study data.

Establishing trustworthiness is a cornerstone of qualitative research, as highlighted by Guba & Lincoln (2003), Maher et al. (2018), Ravitch & Carl (2021), and Shenton (2004). In this study, the researcher took several steps to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. The sample population was carefully selected to meet the study's criteria, and the interview protocol was rigorously tested for quality (Bagdady, 2020). The researcher also engaged in member checking or sharing verbatim interview transcriptions with participants, allowing them to view, confirm, and provide additional insight into their responses. Additionally, the researcher purposefully spent a significant amount of time during the study engaged in the data acquired through several readings of the transcriptions of the interviews and by adhering to a rigorous coding methodology (Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Saldaña, 2016). Lastly, the researcher used various data-gathering methods, such as field notes that were taken throughout each interview (Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Shenton, 2004).

This study expands the current academic tracking literature by examining African American high school principals' perceptions of academic tracking and how it has impacted their instructional decisions. Additionally, it adds to the limited focus on how principals perceive academic tracking's impact on student learning outcomes and self-efficacy, which is crucial since it is the responsibility of principals to provide high-quality, equitable educational opportunities, and guarantee that students succeed academically, graduate on time, and are prepared for either careers or college (Bullard & Taylor, 1993; Cook-Harvey et al., 2016; *Every Student Succeeds*

Act, 2015; Hattie, 2015). Therefore, the current perceptions of high school principals about academic tracking as a school practice, its impact on their instructional decisions, and its impact on students learning outcomes and self-efficacy were all significant issues investigated by this study.

This study was developed around two theoretical frameworks. First, Bandura's self-efficacy theory, which is based on the notion that students' perceptions of their skills and how their SE develops and grows are greatly influenced by their educational environment (Bandura, 1994). Second, Santamaría & Santamaría's Applied Critical Leadership theory argues that ACL gives school leaders the means to facilitate authentic change toward educational equity for all students (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2013). Bandura's SE and Santamaria and Santamaria's ACL theories significantly shaped the development and execution of the research questions, the interview questions that supported them, and the subsequent participant responses. Finally, findings through inductive data analysis were analyzed alongside self-efficacy. They applied critical leadership theories, which resulted in a clearer picture of how African American high school principals perceived academic tracking, its influence on their instructional decisions, and its impact on students' learning outcomes and self-efficacy.

The results of this study indicated that African American high school principals had similar perceptions when defining and describing academic tracking as a school practice. They perceived that specific actions taken by staff influenced positive and negative tracking practices on students. The participants also perceived that students' learning needs, adults' beliefs, and their racial identity as the principal were driving forces in how academic tracking practices influenced their instructional decisions and actions. Finally, they perceived that academic

tracking has a significant impact on student's education and that they have the autonomy to change academic tracking practices within their schools.

Discussion of Findings

RQ1. What are the perceptions of African American high school principals concerning academic tracking as a school practice?

This study found that African American high school principals have similar perceptions when defining and describing academic tracking practices within their school context, which participants described as categorizing and sorting students into learning groups based on their academic abilities and skills. These specific predetermined learning pathways are prescribed by various placement criteria set by the district office, assessment scores, prior grades, staff recommendations, and parental requests. The study findings also demonstrated that the principals perceived that academic tracking practices in their schools resulted primarily from adult actions and decisions, specifically when determining track placement. Participants passionately expressed their conflict with academic tracking as a practice. They believed that academic tracking creates different learning experiences for students in different academic tracks. Students in high-performing tracks were thought to have positive learning experiences, while their peers in lower tracks had negative learning experiences.

Participants repeatedly expressed their perceived impact of school staff's actions in determining students' placement practices. An important perception emphasized by most participants was the permanent nature of track placement. The principals perceived that once students were placed in a particular track, they were “pigeonholed,” as stated by Melissa, and students were unable to “break out of the track,” according to Tamica. Due to the permanent nature of tracking for students, the participants strongly expressed a deep sense of responsibility

to educate both students and teachers about the effects of tracking on students' learning outcomes. They also felt it was essential to communicate with the middle schools' staff and students about their schools' various track and course offerings.

Surprisingly, despite most participants being able to account for the adverse effects of academic tracking on student learning experiences and outcomes, they expressed conflicting feelings about academic tracking as a school practice. They explained that this conflicting feeling about academic tracking practices was because they could see both the benefits and adverse effects of tracking. As explained, one of the benefits of tracking for students is that student's academic needs can be met more effectively when the students are grouped, the leaders can more equitably allocate resources for the track level, and students can be inspired by students who are performing like them.

These findings are significant because they affirm that the participants' perceptions of academic tracking practices within the context of their school, for the most part, align with existing literature. The findings further demonstrate a strong relationship between school leaders and staff on student track placement, with little emphasis on students' roles in determining their track placement. In addition, this study's findings are significant because they emphasize the complex nature of academic tracking as a school practice, as noted by the participants' repeated responses that they see both the pros and cons of tracking as a school practice. They also noted that the tracking begins earlier than high schools, often based on end-of year test scores. University and college admissions requirements also play a crucial part in the type of track students are placed in during their secondary schooling. A few participants in the study referenced their students' future college interests as influencing the master schedule course offerings and student course and track placement.

Connections between the findings of this study and existing literature were numerous. Several existing studies identified school staff strategies to place students into different academic tracks. These are high-stakes assessment scores (Kangas & Cook, 2020), grades (Harris, 2011), and teacher or advisor recommendations made with or without students' knowledge (Beard, 2019; Kangas & Cook, 2020). Supporting the literature, the study's participants described using several of these strategies, many using multiple strategies as part of their student track placement practice. Rubin (2008) discussed at length the impact of adult beliefs about students' abilities influencing student track placement, which supports this study's findings. Existing literature also found that tracking has shown long-term detrimental effects on lower-tracked students, such as lower academic achievement than their peers who were in advanced or college preparatory tracks (Akos et al., 2007; Benson et al., 2020; Callahan, 2005; Chambers, 2009; Stanley & Chambers, 2018). Similar findings were reported in this study as participants described that tracking limited learning opportunities for lower-tracked students lowered their academic performance and negatively impacted their self-concept.

The study findings also directly relate to this study's Bandura's self-efficacy theory and the idea that people's beliefs in their capabilities to produce strongly influence their actions and product outcomes (Bandura, 1994). Participants' responses explicitly linked students' low academic performance in lower track courses to their low self-concept and long-term track placement, which aligns with existing literature that found a positive relationship between the strength of an individual's perception of self-efficacy and academic achievement (Pajares & Schunk, 2001). In addition, participants' responses advocating their sense of responsibility as the school leader to assume the role of advocate to students and families in providing information about tracking as well as promoting student track movement from lower tracks to higher tracks aligns with Santamaria and Santamaria's (2013) Applied Critical Leadership (ACL) Theory's in

the idea that school leaders operating from an ACL lens allows the leader the means to facilitate authentic change toward educational equity for all students (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2013). Participants in the study demonstrated the actions of ACL in how they have assumed leadership responsibilities to address unequal opportunities within their educational communities (Jayavant, 2016; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2013) to change the disparities in student learning outcomes created by tracking practices.

RQ2. How do African American high school principals believe academic tracking influences instructional decisions at their schools?

The research showed that African American high school principals believed academic tracking impacted their instructional decisions in several areas. Several principal participants referenced students' learning needs, adult beliefs, and racial identity as three main factors affecting how academic tracking impacted their instructional decisions. The participants discussed past experiences and current practices in detail to provide context to their stories. Participants described how academic tracking influenced instructional practices and decisions regarding instructional programs and climates in their schools. These findings can be attributed to their role as instructional leaders in the school, which requires them to make decisions about master schedules, allocations of funding and resources, student course enrollment, teacher course assignments, and instructional practices implemented. Participants also perceived that their racial identity as African Americans helped contextualize their beliefs and actions about academic tracking in their instructional decisions. They described how their racial identity impacted how they viewed academic tracking and the learning experiences of their African American students.

The participants demonstrated a deep understanding of how academic tracking directly influenced their instructional decisions, as they were able to provide specific examples of both

positive and negative effects on students and teachers. Their findings underscored the wide-ranging impact academic tracking had across various areas of their schools. Of particular interest was the participants' varying perceptions of tracking's influence on their decisions, depending on the specific area of instructional decision. They discussed how teachers' negative beliefs about students' abilities in lower track levels led to different instructional practices. The disparities in instructional practices at different track levels emerged as a significant area of focus for the participants as leaders. These findings suggest that leaders are acutely aware of how academic tracking can create inequitable learning environments for their students.

Participants also discussed how racial identity influenced their beliefs and actions as school instructional leaders and helped them mediate the harmful effects of tracking at their schools. Most participants were able to provide specific examples with either students or teachers which helped shape their perceptions of tracking and instructional decisions. Of interest, two participants expressed how their own high school experiences with tracking have fostered their desire to change tracking practices in their schools for students who look like them. When considering the significant influence of participants' racial identity on shaping them as instructional leaders, it is vital to understand the relationship between school leaders' identity and academic tracking practices implemented in their schools.

In terms of the RQ2 relations to the existing literature, the study’s findings confirmed that students' track placement strategy varied by school, with most schools using two to three criteria to place students into tracks (Beard, 2019; Braddock, 1993; Harris, 2011; Kangas & Cook, 2020). In addition, the study’s findings demonstrated that participants struggled with the inequitable learning experiences for their students in different academic tracks. Participants discussed that they found students experienced learning differently with different learning

outcomes depending on their track placement (Buttaro & Catsambis, 2019; Harris, 2011; Modica, 2015; Sampson, 2019), especially for students in lower tracks receiving sub-standard learning (Batruch et al., 2019; Benson et al., 2020; Chambers, 2009).

How non-African American principals view tracking practices impacting student learning experiences at different school track levels is worth considering. Benson et al. (2020) detailed a study of middle school students in urban school districts in the southeastern region of the United States. They found that a cohort of Black and Latino children were taught by teachers with less experience than their White counterparts across four years and different grades. They further claimed that more experienced educators significantly impact their students' learning more than less experienced colleagues. This study's findings aligned with the existing literature in that most participants expressed that students' learning needs are critical when assigning teachers to courses. Participants supported assigning teachers with the most experience to courses with students with the most significant learning needs, lower-track, or foundation courses, as they argue those teachers have the knowledge and skills to provide instruction to meet students' learning needs.

Contrary to Smith et al.'s (2016) study, which used data from a 2012 national survey of science and math schools and teachers in K-12 Schools from all 50 states and the District of Columbia and found that students assigned to lower-track classes had access to fewer instructional resources, the findings from this study indicated that participants provided their lower-track courses with more instructional resources. Participants discussed utilizing their allocated funds and resources to support student learning needs in foundation courses. They discussed allocating instructional materials and human resources to create a more enriched learning experience for their students on the lower track. In addition, participants expressed that

they also utilized instructional funds and materials to support students in higher tracks who may need additional support to be successful.

Bandura's Self-Efficacy theory and the studies that found ability grouping harms students' self-efficacy, especially those in the lower ability group/track (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2016; Pajares & Schunk, 2001), which are disproportionately comprised of African American and Latino students (Beard, 2019; Modica, 2015; Oakes, 1985) has a solid potential to have detrimental effects on African American students as indicated by study findings that students in different tracks experienced learning differently with lower track students at a disadvantage. The study found that principals perceived that teachers of students in the lower tracks had lower expectations of their students. Participants repeatedly expressed that their lower teachers' expectations prevented teachers from pushing the students to perform higher and or motivating students to move into a higher academic track. While participants did not discuss student dropout as a factor of academic tracking in their schools, which was found in the study by Werblow et al. (2013), it would be a worthy effort for school principals to assess whether teachers low expectations of students in lower tracks correlates to a decreased sense of SE of student motivation and engagement which can increase risk of students underachieving and dropping out of school (Schunk & Mullen, 2012).

In relation to Santamaria and Santamaria's (2013) ACL theory and the idea that practicing ACL will give school leaders the means to facilitate authentic change toward educational equity for all students (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2013), unsurprisingly, most of the study's participants perceived their racial identity as a critical factor shaping their leadership beliefs, expectations, and actions regarding academic tracking practices and its impact on their instructional decisions. Recognizes that their racial identity is a critical component as

instructional leaders in their school reveals that the ACL theory is realizing its full potential as a strengths-based model of leadership in which educational leaders consider the social context of their school community and empower community members based on a leader's identity as perceived through the lens of CRT (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2013).

RQ3. What are the Perceptions of African American High School Principals of Using Academic Tracking on Student Learning and Self-Efficacy?

This research showed that these African American high school principals perceived that academic tracking significantly affected students' educational experiences, learning outcomes, and self-efficacy. All participants discussed the positive and adverse effects of tracking on students' education. The study showed that the effects of academic tracking students' education were different based on the student's race, track level, and/or socio-economic status. The study found that principals perceived that teachers' beliefs about students critically influenced how academic tracking affected students' learning experiences, outcomes, and self-efficacy. Consequently, they expressed ongoing efforts to coach staff on effective instructional strategies and to use students' learning potential when planning and delivering classroom instruction.

Significant evidence showed that these principals perceived they had the authority to change academic practices in their schools. All participants discussed specific actions they planned to implement to change academic tracking practices in their schools. The principals' detracking strategies fell into structural and cultural categories. The participants spoke at length about cultural detracking practices of changing teachers' narratives, beliefs, and mindsets as the harder of the two categories of detracking strategies to accomplish. It is worth noting that since the principals perceived teachers' beliefs as a significant influencer in tracking, they consider it a critical place to focus detracking efforts.

The connections between these African American high school principals' perceptions of academic tracking impact on students' learning outcomes and self-efficacy can also be connected to existing literature. As participants noted, academic tracking could benefit or hurt students of different races and socio-economic statuses (Batruch et al., 2019; Beard, 2019; Kangas & Cook, 2020; Werblow et al., 2013) and by track level (Darling-Hammond, 2010). As participants discussed, they felt that teachers' beliefs influenced the impact of academic tracking on students' learning experiences, learning outcomes, and self-efficacy (Batruch et al., 2019). Surprisingly, Melissa was an outlier in the study findings as she credited student motivation as contributing to students' learning outcomes and self-efficacy, not academic tracking. Melissa's perception contradicted findings in the existing literature. Regarding Melissa's response, I wondered if the fact that of the six participants, she had the least years of experience as a principal experience and only two years as a secondary principal, which was the least among all participants, played a role in her response. Melissa's prior principal experience was at the elementary level.

Another connection to the existing literature is the principal's belief that one of their primary responsibilities as instructional leaders is providing equitable educational opportunities to all students. The principals in this study discussed at length how they serve as advocates to promote positive learning environments for all students (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016) and continue to build a school culture by engaging with teachers and students to ensure that students and staff goals and actions align with the school's goals and practices (Leithwood et al., 2020; Zhang & Hua, 2024; Leithwood et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2024; Zhang & Wind, 2019; Zhang, 2019). As the instructional leaders in their school, the principals discussed structural and cultural detracking strategies, which they contend are initiatives that can promote student learning (Hallinger et al., 2020).

Additionally, the study findings revealed strong connections to Bandura's SE theory and the idea that schools foster student cognitive self-efficacy development (Bandura, 1994; Pajares & Urdan, 2006) and that school practices of ability grouping can harm students' SE, especially those placed in lower ability groups/tracks (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2016; Pajares & Schunk, 2001). Study findings revealed that principals perceived students in the lower track had decreased self-efficacy because of low teacher expectations of the students in the lower track and sometimes low expectations of family members. Finally, other study findings connect to ACL theory's idea that principals consider the social context of their school community and empower community members, in this case, their teachers, based on their racial identity as perceived through the lens of CRT (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2013). This study revealed that all principals perceived the authority to change academic tracking practices through the social context of changing staff beliefs/mindsets and narratives. Furthermore, they were working on accomplishing this in their schools.

Implications

The results from this study provided numerous implications and recommendations for policy, practice, and future research on academic tracking as a school practice. For RQ1, these implications include the need for superintendents and other educational leaders to require professional learning to educate principals and teachers about the effects of academic tracking in schools. Professional learning should focus on theories of academic tracking, placement practices, and the advantages and disadvantages of academic tracking practices. These three areas of focus for professional learning are crucial considering the study's data, which revealed that principals perceived that school staff sometimes had biased beliefs about students which influenced students' track placement. In addition, the study showed, along with existing

literature, that for some student groups, track placement is permanent and has long-term detrimental effects, especially for African American students who are overrepresented in the lower tracks and unlikely to move into higher tracks (Akos et al., 2007; Benson et al., 2020; Chambers, 2018). Noting these findings, focused professional learning on academic tracking theories, practices, and effects could be an effective strategy in developing staff knowledge and informed decision-making about academic tracking practices in their schools.

Additionally, some principals in this study felt academic tracking segregated their student body, negatively impacted students' self-image, and resulted in lower academic achievement for students in the lower track; utilizing and incorporating research findings about the relationship between academic tracking and self-efficacy is a noteworthy consideration. The evidence that ability grouping harms students' self-efficacy, especially those placed in lower ability groups/tracks (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2016; Pajares & Schunk, 2001), is vital to include in school staff training about academic tracking along with best practices to promote students' increased self-efficacy to increase their knowledge and hopefully their beliefs and practices regarding academic tracking.

A final recommendation related to RQ1 for state and local school boards to require schools to hold information sessions and provide written communications to students and families about the schools' track-level pathways options at the school. This study showed that principals were often the advocates in their building in educating students and families about academic tracking. None of the participants discussed consistent practices in sharing academic tracking information with students and families. The notion that the principals were the ones in their school to inform students and parents about academic tracking practices aligns with Santamaria and Santamaria's ACL theory's idea that school leaders are responsible for

addressing unequal opportunities within their educational communities (Jayavant, 2016; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2013). Thus, it will be beneficial to students and parents for state and local school boards to develop policies requiring schools to have informational sessions and provide written information to students and parents about the school's track levels and placement practices, which will increase the students and families knowledge and possible engagement in making informed decisions about the student's educational pathway.

To address practice, policy, and future research related to RQ2, developing and implementing ongoing and targeted professional development focused on scaffolding and differentiation strategies for teachers assigned to teach lower-tracked courses should be provided and monitored by leadership for effectiveness and consistency over time. This recommendation is supported by the findings in this study that there are disparities in students' educational experiences, especially students in the lower track. As articulated by Kenneth, “If a class has low-performing students, teachers will not push that class to grade level or above grade level work; they would tend to teach to that lower level.” Renee stated, “Teachers ask not to teach low-performing math students, do not want to teach struggling students, and believe teaching lower-level students becomes a nightmare.” Rachel also expressed, “We need to figure out how to accelerate leaning towards grade level for lower students.” Therefore, providing ongoing and targeted in-service instructional strategies, professional development-focused scaffolding, and differentiating instruction to teachers assigned to teach lower-track courses, such as foundations courses, could positively impact equitable learning experiences and outcomes for students assigned to lower-track courses. The culture that the strongest teachers in the school are needed for the lower tracks is a value that leaders can examine, intertwined with lower class size and increased resources. In addition, it is just as important for school principals to assign competent

and skilled teachers to teach advanced courses to students in the upper tracks. Since students in advanced courses such as AP, IB, and Cambridge have either a national assessment or a rigorous portfolio process to earn college-level credit, the teachers assigned to these courses must be properly trained and certified in how to teach at that level to ensure students are successful in passing the assessment and the portfolio at college level rigor.

In terms of recommendations for future research, the relationship and degree to which academic tracking impacts school leaders' instructional decisions need to be studied to expand the current literature on the impact and effects of academic tracking practices. This study revealed that academic tracking significantly impacts principals' instructional decisions. All participants clearly stated how academic tracking impacted their instructional decisions, including their master schedule, school funding and resources allocation, advanced course enrollment, teacher course assignments, and instructional practice. Thus, future studies to investigate this phenomenon should be considered, which might inform future education reforms regarding academic tracking as an educational practice.

A final recommendation for future research related to RQ2 is to investigate the relationship between principals' racial identity and academic tracking practices implemented in their schools. The research around ACL theory advocated that by using the strengths-based ACL model of leadership practice, educational leaders empower community members by considering the social context of their school and projecting their own identity via the Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2013). According to ACL, marginalized people, school leaders of color, and those who could decide to use a CRT lens to practice leadership should base their decisions on the positive cross-cultural characteristics of their identities (Santamaria & Jean-Marie, 2014). In addition, this study's findings strongly reflected

that the principal's racial identity impacted their beliefs and actions regarding academic tracking practices in their schools. As stated by Kenneth, “I bring our perspective of an African American male who is in leadership in a school where they are the lowest-performing group academically. I am trying to discuss strategies for how teachers connect with students like me.” Therefore, investigating the relationship between principals' racial identity and academic tracking practices implanted in their schools adds to the existing literature and informs educators about academic tracking as a school practice (Kudlats, 2024; Kudlats, 2024; Kudlats & La Serna, 2023; Kudlats & Brown, 2021; Kudlats & Brown, 2021; Kudlats, 2017).

To address practice, policy, and research involving RQ3 and the finding that academic tracking can be a contributor to disparities in students' learning experiences, outcomes, and self-efficacy for some students based on their race, track level, and economic status, educational reforms need to address these education inequities. In this study, high school principals perceived that while academic tracking had some positive effects on high-performing students, academic tracking had adverse effects on students in lower-track courses, which were predominantly African American and Latino students in the lower socio-economic income range. Participants provided detailed accounts of how these student groups had limited learning opportunities in some schools, lower academic achievement, and experienced decreased self-efficacy. This study's findings and similar findings in the literature discussed provide evidence that educational reforms should be considered to address educational inequities for specific student groups resulting from the existing use of academic tracking practices in schools.

Additional implications for research exist beyond the three study research questions. While this study yielded significant results related to African American high school principals’

perceptions of academic tracking as a school practice, the study participants were all African American by design. They had many years of experience as principals in North Carolina public schools. Expanding the scope of high school principals to include school districts outside of North Carolina, a more demographically diverse sample of principals in terms of ethnicity and school leadership experience, additional rich data could be obtained to inform academic tracking practice and policy. The information gained could guide effective detracking practices in secondary schools. Findings could also inform equitable instructional practices to address the learning needs of students with varying abilities and needs. Gaining a greater understanding of effective tracking and detracking strategies could also inform more effective instructional leadership practices implemented by school leaders, specifically regarding master scheduling, allocation of funds and resources, advanced course enrollment, teacher course assignments, and instructional practices.

Conclusion

This study emerged from many years I served as an educator, serving in various capacities as a college professor, a high school teacher, an academic facilitator, and an elementary school administrator. With over 30 years of witnessing the adverse effects of academic tracking on some student groups, I have wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and create equitable learning experiences for all students. I was troubled by this issue, and I struggled for years to find information or solutions about the challenges it posed for students, especially African American and Latino students.

Emerging from this was the paradigm shift from student-centered focused research, which is predominantly the focus of academic tracking studies, to investigating school leaders' perceptions about the phenomenon. By understanding the phenomena from a leadership

perspective, in doing so, it hypothesized that African American principals would be able to provide a unique leadership perspective from their specific school context. Therefore, this exploratory case study aimed to understand African American high school principals' perceptions of academic tracking. In particular, it sought to understand how academic tracking influenced school principals' instructional decisions.

Study interviews, questions, collected data, and findings were all guided by and analyzed through the lens of Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory and Santamaria and Santamaria's (2013) applied critical leadership theory. The African American principals in this study have a standard definition/description of academic tracking as a school practice. They perceive that staff actions directly influenced the school track placement practices that positively and negatively affect student learning outcomes. The principals perceived that school staff beliefs and the principal racial identity are significant contributors to how academic tracking practices impact their instructional decisions. They perceived that academic tracking practices in their school lead to different learning experiences, learning outcomes, and levels of self-efficacy in different student groups by race, track level, and socio-economic status. The use of academic tracking in their high schools in the short run was insurmountable. However, all were particularly attuned to the potential negative effects, particularly in the lower tracks, and all were working hard to mitigate any negative effects. This included them specifically targeting the careful placement of teachers for lower track students and focused coaching of these teachers to challenge their belief system regarding what was possible. All participants mentioned carefully looking at students themselves along with their data to make placement decisions. All were willing to try and move students up to higher tracks where possible.

The findings from this study revealed numerous implications and recommendations. The researcher recommended that superintendents and other educational leaders participate in mandatory professional development throughout their schools to inform personnel and administrators about evidence-based procedures and the positive and negative effects of academic tracking in schools. District policy requires schools to inform students and families about the school's track-level pathways options; leadership should also oversee professional development for teachers assigned to teach lower-tracked courses to ensure consistency and success over time; and educational reforms should address these education inequities. Future research could include expanding knowledge about the consequences and implications of academic tracking, which influences the instructional decisions made by school administrators, and investigating the relationship between principals' racial identity and academic tracking practices implemented in their schools with a particular focus on hiring teachers with a growth mindset and placing strong teachers in lower tracks. A final recommendation for future research is to expand the scope of this research to gather more data that could inform more effective detracking practices or alternatives to tracking.

These recommendations face challenges. Any suggestions related to policies require school boards to consider and acknowledge the research findings from this study and existing literature that provides evidence of the barriers academic tracking poses to students' equitable learning outcomes to bring the recommended changes to fruition. There are potential funding challenges for future research to be conducted on this topic. To this end, it will be essential to bring the findings of this study to the attention of policymakers and education reformers. The same holds true with funding challenges; researchers may have opportunities to publish and find the platforms for discussion and informational presentation of this material.

Through studies such as this one, additional information is added to the field of principals' perceptions of academic tracking as a school practice that can be shared and analyzed to encourage additional research on this topic as well as changes in academic tracking as a school practice, detracking practices, and policy. By expanding the scope of the study to include additional school districts and a diverse pool of principals in terms of race and experience, valuable data can be gained to address the inequitable learning outcomes of some student groups resulting from schools utilizing academic tracking practices. The good news is that this study's results show that while tracking was seen as a double-edged sword, the African American principals were all finding ways to mediate the negative effects of the lower-track stigma in their schools.

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APPENDIX A: SOCIAL MEDIA POSTING

CALLING ALL AFRICAN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS!

Over Spring-Summer 2024, I am completing my doctoral dissertation research study at UNCC about African American High School Principals' Perception of Academic Tracking and its Influence on Their Instructional Decisions, Student Self-efficacy, and Learning Outcomes.

I am reaching out to my network of Black/African American high school Principals who would be interested in participating in the study. The study aims to examine the perceptions of African American high school principals in North Carolina schools, who have been a principal for more than one year. My focus will be your perceptions of academic tracking and its influence on your instructional decisions, students' self-efficacy, and learning outcomes. This study is unrelated to my current professional role within the North Carolina school system.

If you identify as a Black/African American high school principal and are interested in participating in the study, please complete the survey request linked below. If you do not identify as a Black/ African American high school principal and/or have a network of African American HS, please share and repost this request in your network.

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT SURVEY

I am Claudia Allen, a doctoral student in the Education Leadership program at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte (UNCC). This research aims to examine the perceptions of African American high school principals in North Carolina schools. My focus will be your perceptions of academic tracking, its impact on your instructional decisions, student outcomes, and student self-efficacy. This study is unrelated to my current professional role within the North Carolina school system. If you are willing to participate in the study, please respond to the survey questions below and provide your contact information.

---

1. Are you a licensed North Carolina K-12 Principal?
   Mark only one oval.
   - ◯ *Yes*
   - ◯ *No*

2. Select your current administrative role.
   Mark only one oval.
   - ◯ Principal/Headmaster
   - ◯ Assistant/Vice Principal

3. How many years have you served as a high school school Principal?
   Mark only one oval.
   - ◯ Less than 1 year
   - ◯ 1-3 Years
   - ◯ 4-6 Years
   - ◯ 7-10 Years
   - ◯ 11-15 Years
   - ◯ 16-20+ Years

4. What is your ethnicity?
   Mark only one oval.
   - ◯ African American/ Black
   - ◯ American Indian/Alaskan Native
   - ◯ Asian
   - ◯ Hispanic
   - ◯ Pacific

/Islander
- White
- Two or More Races
- Other

5. Do you self-identify as a primary instructional leader at your school?
   Mark only one oval.
   - *Yes*
   - *No*

6. If you agree to participate and meet the criteria, please provide your first and last name so I may contact you.
   _____

7. If you agree to participate and meet the criteria, please provide your email address so I can contact you.
   _____

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Title: African American High School Principals' Perceptions of Academic Tracking and its Influence on Instructional Decisions and Student Outcomes

RQ1. What are the perceptions of African American high school principals concerning academic tracking as a school practice?

1. How would you define or describe school academic tracking practices?

2. What has been your experience with academic tracking practices?
   Prompt: How long have you implemented academic tracking?
   Prompt: What academic tracking practices are used at your school?

3. What are your feelings and thoughts about using academic tracking effectiveness as a school practice? On what specifically do you base these thoughts?
   Prompt: What are the beneficial aspects of academic tracking
   Prompt: What are the negative aspects of academic tracking

RQ2. How do African American high school principals believe academic tracking influences instructional decisions at their schools?

4. How does academic tracking affect instructional decisions in your school?
   Prompt: How does academic tracking affect your school's master schedule?
   Prompt: How does academic tracking affect the allotment of instructional funds and resources at your school?
   Prompt: How do you determine which students participate in advanced programs or classes, and which do not?
   Prompt: How does academic tracking affect the assignment of teachers to specific classes or programs?
   Prompt: How does academic tracking affect classroom instruction?

5. How does your identity as an African American principal affect your decisions about academic tracking?
   Prompt: Research suggests that academic tracking may benefit some groups of students more than others. Tell me how you feel about that, and what actions do you take in response to that research.

RQ3. What are the perceptions of African American high school principals of using tracking on student learning and self-efficacy?

6. How do you think academic tracking impacts students' school experiences?

7. How do you think academic tracking impacts students' learning outcomes?

8. How do you think academic tracking impacts students' self-efficacy?

9. Which economic and racial groups of students participate in advanced programs and courses most frequently in your school? Why?

10. Does academic tracking affect the learning outcomes and self-efficacy of students from various economic and racial groups differently? If so, how?

11. Do you perceive you have the authority to change institutional structures such as tracking in your school? Why? Or Why not?

APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT

Consent to be Part of a Research Study

Title of the Project: *African American High School Principals' Perceptions of Academic Tracking and its Influence on Instructional Decisions and Student Outcomes*
Principal Investigator: Claudia Allen

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Rebecca Shore

You are invited to participate in a research study. Participation in this research study is voluntary. The information provided is to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

Important Information You Need to Know

- The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of African American high school principals about academic tracking and its influence on instructional decisions.
- You will be asked to participate in a one-on-one, in-person or virtual interview via Zoom.
- If you choose to participate, it will require approximately one hours.
- After the interview, you will receive a $10 Amazon gift card.
- Risks or discomforts from this research would be the potential discomfort of sharing your perceptions about academic tracking.
- Benefits include increasing the body of knowledge surrounding academic tracking and its impact on school leader instructional decisions.
- You may withdraw from the study at any time.

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before you decide whether to participate.

Why Are We Doing This Study?

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the perceptions of African American high school principals about the use of academic tracking in high schools Also, I wish to understand if and how tracking influences principals' instructional decisions.

Why Are You Being Asked to Be in This Research Study?

You are being asked to join this study because you meet the study criteria. You have identified yourself as a licensed K-12 African American high school principal serving in a traditional public, private, or public charter high school (grades 9-12) in North Carolina. You have at least one year of experience as a high school principal and acknowledge that you are an instructional leader in your school.

What Will Happen if I Take Part in This Study?

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one, in-person or *Zoom* interview with the researcher, which will not exceed one hour. The audio portion of the interview will be recorded for transcription, and your identity will be confidential. Pseudonyms will be used when I present the findings (written/presentations), I will not include information that would identify the participants.

You will be contacted after the interview by the researcher for follow-up for transcript accuracy checks, also known as member checking. During this process, the researcher will email each participant a copy of their interview transcript to verify that its content and meaning are accurate. If participants need to make changes to the transcript, I will arrange for an additional in-person meeting or Zoom (non-recorded) session to discuss changes you, as the participants, deem necessary to your transcript. All interview audio recordings will be deleted once files are converted into transcript form.

What Are the Benefits of This Study?

As a participant, you will not benefit directly from participating in this study. However, school reformers and policy developers will gain a better understanding of the impact of academic tracking on instructional decisions made by African American school leaders and could affect policies that foster and support schools in creating and maintaining a more equitable learning environment.

What Risks Might I Experience?

The questions may be personal and sensitive, and you might experience emotional discomfort discussing work-related information. I do not expect this risk to be common. You may choose to skip a question you do not want to answer. To maximize confidentiality, the researcher will utilize pseudonyms for the audio recordings, transcripts, and field notes related to the interview. All interview audio recordings will be deleted once a transcript is of the interview id created.

How Will My Information Be Protected?

All data and digital files will be password-protected. All files will be stored on a password-protected device. All transcript files will be deleted within six (6) months of completing the study. No participant names will be used in order to protect your identity. Study data will be shared only as required to complete the study via UNC-Charlotte email and sharing programs.

I hope to publish the results of this study. To protect your privacy, I will not include any information that could identify you and will protect the confidentiality of the research data by using pseudonyms in the written study and coding for subject names in interview data.

Other people may need to see the information I collect about you. These are professionals who work for UNC Charlotte and other agencies as required by law or allowed by federal regulations.

How Will My Information Be Used After the Study Is Over?

The data will NOT include information that could identify you. HOWEVER, the research data findings may be shared with other investigators and/or use your responses in future studies without asking for your consent again. The information shared with these other investigators will not contain information that could directly identify you. There still may be a possibility that someone could determine that the information is about you.

Data in the form of the final written study may be deposited in a public repository, such as *ProQuest*, which is a database that houses theses and dissertations. Typically, access to these sites is restricted to students associated with a higher educational institution.

Will I Receive an Incentive for Taking Part in This Study?

After the interview, you will be offered a $10 Amazon gift card, which you can refuse.

What Are My Rights If I Take Part in This Study?

It is your decision to be in this research study. Participation is voluntary. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You can also choose not to answer any questions you do not wish to answer.
If you choose to withdraw from this study, any data collected will be destroyed, and you will not receive the $10 gift card. None of your data will be included in the final study.

The Primary Investigator, Claudia M. Allen, may choose to terminate participation at any time without the participant's consent for actions inconsistent with the purpose of the study and or within the guidelines establish with this consent form.

Who Can Answer My Questions About This Study and My Rights as a Participant?

For questions about this research, you may contact Claudia Allen by email at calle125@uncc.edu or at 704- 904-4170 (cell), or Professor Shore (rshore6@uncc.edu; 704-687-8867, ext. 4).

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher or the faculty advisor, please contact the Office of Research Protections and Integrity (uncc-irb@uncc.edu).

Consent to Participate

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will receive a copy of this document for your records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.
I understand what the study is about, and my questions have been answered to this point. I agree to take part in this study.

_____
Name (Print)

_____
Signature Date

_____
Signature of person obtaining consent Date

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW SCHEDULING FORM

AAHS Principal Perception Interview Scheduling

Please select 1date and time from the choices below. Then select your preference of mode for the interview session.

* Indicates required question

1. Email *

2. Email Address *

3. April 12th

Mark only one oval per row.

	9am-10am	10am-11am	11am-Noon	1pm-2pm	2pm-3pm	3pm-4pm
April 12th						
April 17th						
April 18th						

4.

Mark only one oval per row.

	3pm-4pm	4pm-5Pm
April 15th	◯	◯

5. April 19th

Mark only one oval per row.

	1pm-2pm	2pm-3pm	3pm-4pm
April 19th	◯	◯	◯

6. Please select your preferred mode for the interview session (reminder for accuracy purpose the interview session will be audio recorded)

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Zoom 1 hour session
- ◯ In-person 1 hour session

7. If you selected In-person mode, please list your location preference:

_____