Streaming in Ontario High Schools: Exploring Student Experiences

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
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Abstract

This practitioner research study adds to the limited research available about high school streaming in Ontario. Unlike most research about streaming, which is quantitative, this study is qualitative and sought student perspectives absent from conversations about structuring students in public education. It explores students’ experiences of being separated into pathways for their courses throughout high school, and how these placements affect their academics, relationships, and self-concepts. The project involved semi-structured interviews with nine grade eleven students across the academic, applied, and enriched pathways. The research method captured students’ stories and details about how they feel progressing through school with significant labels attached to their names. It revealed problematic social hierarchies present in the school, and vastly different exposures to information about both secondary and post-secondary choices that translate to access to opportunity. The study makes recommendations for changes to the current streaming structure, and for the value of practitioner research.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Overview

This study explores students’ experiences of being separated into specific pathways for their courses throughout high school, and how these placements affect their academics, their relationships, and their self-concepts. This project involved interviews with nine students across the academic, applied, and enriched pathways. The research method captured some of the students’ stories, and details about how they feel progressing through school with significant labels attached to their names. The study also gives valuable insight to the ways that schools structure students, and the effects that this structuring has on individuals and groups.

In Ontario, high school students are divided into three pathways for the majority of their courses, especially in their compulsory credits. This management of student bodies structures much of the high school experience and has a vast impact on students: academically, socially, psychologically, and even financially, as it impacts their futures as they enter the work world. Many studies in the past have explored different pieces of this influence, including how students are placed into a pathway, where they go after, how it impacts their earning potential, etc. In addition, some research has explored teacher attitudes towards the pathways and the effects that streaming the students this way can impact teaching. However, almost no academic research has been done in Ontario, especially recent research. Further, very little of the research represents student voices, or assesses the actual, lived experience of moving through grades nine to twelve in such a structured system. This study bridges the gap between pre- and post-high school effects of tracking, and explores the experience of streaming from the student perspective.

Problem and Significance

Before I began teaching, I worked for a social services agency. The agency provided a wide variety of community services, from justice, to residential programs, to addictions and mental health supports, and I worked with youth and families in stages of crisis and struggle. I worked in the capacity of both a primary case worker and as a youth anger control group facilitator, and frequently liaised with the schools my clients attended. Every client had difficulty
with mainstream schooling, almost without exception. They struggled individually with addictions, mental illness, family breakdown, poverty, and transience, but were united in their lack of success in the public school system.

Previously, while I was an undergraduate, I volunteered for some time in a Section 23 classroom; it was incredible to see the empowerment that education gave to the students, and the difference that school made in the ways they lived their lives. This was a meaningful experience for me, and it drove me to pursue a career in education. After completing teachers’ college, I did some occasional teaching in a program called “Literacy and Basic Skills,” for adults who had not achieved their high school diplomas during their adolescence. Their stories about how they struggled because of a lack of reading and writing competency were powerful and come to my mind regularly, especially as I teach students who contemplate dropping out of high school. My experiences with these alternative programs gave me a sense of how important school can be, but also left me with a lot of questions about who the education system was built to serve.

When I began my career as a public high school teacher, I saw the same cohort of students struggling repeatedly, across ages, subjects, and schools. I also began to see another trend reflected from my time in social services: often, those who were struggling to succeed in the public school system were minority groups; they were marginalized along lines of race, class, or culture. I noticed that these groups were highly represented in secondary school applied pathway classes.1 This is further troubling because it is widely known that applied students have a much greater rate of failure on the Ontario Secondary Student Literacy Test, the only standardized test in Ontario that impacts student graduation (it is a required credit for the Ontario Secondary School Diploma) (Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 56). Thus, students who are already experiencing the challenges of belonging to minority groups are also at a significantly higher risk of failure on a tremendously important assessment. I began to wonder what other implications their struggles with achievement could have.

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1 “Pathway” refers to which type of course a student chooses. In Grades 9 and 10, students choose academic or applied courses; in grades 11 and 12, students choose between college, university, workplace, or open courses. The course types differ in knowledge and skill and are outlined in the Ministry document Ontario Schools, Kindergarten to Grade 12: Policy and Program Requirements (2011, p. 65).
One conversation that resonated with me involved a grade twelve student who was completing the final credits required for his high school diploma. We were discussing his post-graduation plans and he stated that he was going to grow up and get a job, because that is what people do. There was little optimism in his plans, and the resignation in his voice was palpable. Like many other students, he had been placed on an Individual Education Plan (IEP) at a young age, and he described how he had been streamed, by grades and guidance counsellors, into the lowest-tracked classes throughout high school, despite his desire to go to college. Coming from a poor family, he was facing a future of unskilled labour and insecure employment, and his years in the public education system had done little to improve his opportunities or his achievement. This conversation lingered with me, and I wrestled with how his life could have gone differently, the cost of unused potential, and the weight of my own complacency. I also struggled with how to turn my frustration into a researchable line of inquiry. Campano (2007) calls this the “story of the question,” relating the stories of his own professional journey that became the motivation for research and inquiry about troubling topics and unsettling inequities (p. 7). My daily struggles are the most fertile ground for my questions, as they are driven by my passion and my frustration about the inequality my students face.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) suggest that in much research performed by teachers in classrooms,

questions surface first from their practice. Typically they are not expressly (or at least initially) tied to issues that others might view as significant for building knowledge in the field, but rather emerge from some discrepancy, nudge, problem, curiosity, desire, surprise, contradiction, and/or "felt need" that is directly tied to their particular setting. (p. 696)

This is true of my own research, although my research is not specific to literacy. My questions about streaming emerge from inequities I see in the classroom, from discrepancies between policy and practice, and from conversations with frustrated, defeated, and exasperated students. According to Freeman (1998), “Inquiries, regardless of their nature, do not spring out of thin air; they are rooted both directly and indirectly in who we are, what we believe, and the questions we are socially positioned to ask” (p. 54). I wonder why I seem to see the same students – lower socio-economic status, mental health issues, learning disabilities, racial
minorities – struggle in the same ways, repeatedly. I also continuously see these students opting for the college or workplace course pathways, a phenomenon that looks eerily like social class streaming, or as Joan Cone (2002) calls it, “caste-like placement” (p. 2). I was fascinated and troubled by the People for Education report Choosing Courses for High School (2014) which reflected my own classroom observations about problematic social streaming, and the limitations course pathways place on student opportunity. The report claims that "substantial evidence suggests that sorting students in this way tends to reinforce disadvantage faced by low-income and racialized groups, perpetuating inequalities over their lifetime" (People for Education, 2014, p. 1). Public education thus becomes a sorting mechanism.

In Ontario high schools, students are divided into three different streams in grade nine: academic, applied, and locally developed.² Most courses are divided this way, with the exception of “elective” courses that are left de-streamed and heterogeneous with regard to ability. These course choices lead to further pathway divisions after grade ten, when students must choose between university, college, or workplace destinations for their post-secondary lives.

Tracking is “an organizational practice whose aim is to facilitate instruction and to increase learning. The theory of tracking argues that tracking permits teachers to tailor instruction to the ability level of their student” (Hallinan, 1994, p. 79). Although tracking is intended to facilitate the management of students in classes and structure school populations, its implications are numerous both during and after high school completion.

Public education is a cornerstone of modern, democratic society and it continues to be one of its most important, influential institutions. However, it is also a part of the process that reproduces and maintains systems of social class streaming and economic disparity. Althusser’s classic reproduction theory suggests that streaming and maintenance of the status quo replicates “attitudes, values, and norms that provide the required discipline and respect essential for the maintenance of the existing relations of production” (as cited in Giroux, 1981, p. 4).

Reproduction of social classes, values, and culture limits the social mobility, opportunity, and

² “Streaming” and “tracking” are similar processes, although tracking in the U.S. context usually means that students are in a specific pathway for all courses. In Ontario, students have the flexibility to choose some academic, some applied, and some open credits, though most students do not mix and match their courses as such. In this project, I have used the terms “streaming” and “tracking” interchangeably.
well-being of individuals who are not from the middle- or upper-class, or who are from marginalized groups. Public education is broadly considered to be an equalizer, giving all students in Ontario access to the same high-quality curriculum, teaching, and opportunities, yet much evidence exists to the contrary. The division of student bodies reproduces a system that privileges the majority and oppresses students occupying marginal spaces.

This reproduction, critics argue, has its roots in the course streaming or pathway separation that students experience in secondary school; further, the detrimental effects of this streaming process are not limited to economic and class domains post-graduation, but have visible impact on student well-being and development during high school as well. Streaming or “pathway selection” has a more harmful impact on students who are tracked at grades nine and ten into the lower-ability groups than on their more academically successful peers. More bluntly, students who are tracked into anything but academic classes experience negative effects on their identities, life trajectories, and school achievement.

The Ontario Ministry of Education’s newest guidance and career education document, *Creating Pathways to Success* (2013), suggests that its goal is to “help students achieve their personal goals and become competent, successful, and contributing members of society. This is a whole-school program delivered through classroom instruction linked to the curriculum and through broader school programs and activities” (p. 3). However, the document has not created any significant change in student course selection and the same students continue to opt for the same pathways, with the same outcomes. Public education continues to fall short of its promise to equalize society, and to help all students to be successful.

In this thesis, I begin with a literature review that provides an overview of the research regarding tracking and the complexities of this issue, and that situates my work within the literature. Next, I describe the methodology of my research and describe the specific process involved, including the methods and interview protocol. Finally, I explore the data from the interviews and provide recommendations for the field and my own practice, based on the information. The thesis is driven by these key questions:

1. What are students’ experiences of and perspectives on streaming?
   a. Why do students believe they are in the specific streams that they are in, and what do they think of these streams?
b. What and/or who influenced their placements as they entered these streams?

2. What impact does being in a particular stream have on students’ academic self-concepts and sense of self-esteem?

a. What impact does streaming seem to have on students’ post-secondary plans for further education and/or work?

The review of the literature provides a background for the topic and introduces some of the key concerns, as well as some of the reasons why tracking has become an established, consistent practice despite the many alarms it raises. The literature review also details some of the problematic equity concerns that drive much of the interest in this topic, and my own interest in the project. It begins in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when modern conversations about tracking were gaining momentum and education was beginning to pay attention to the unfairness that resulted from rigid, tracked school systems.
Chapter 2
Literature Review

This practitioner research study explores students’ experiences of being tracked in an Ontario high school. In 2014, the charity group People for Education released the report “Choosing Courses for High School,” a document that heavily criticizes the practice of course selection in Ontario. The report attacks streaming for several reasons, including achievement gaps, reinforcing disadvantage, and perpetuating overall inequality (People for Education, p. 1).

This document revisits the topic of tracking, which has been largely silent in Ontario since Stacking the Deck in 1992 and the restructuring of high school course selection in 1999. This literature review traces the evolution of research about tracking from the late 1980s, when it began to receive a lot of public attention, through the 90s, when it was highly criticized, to now, when it is receiving attention yet again. The review is organized largely by chronology, although I end by speaking about research that is specific to Ontario, as little tracking research has been done in a Canadian context, and even less in Ontario.

Although streaming of students in public education has been a controversial topic to some degree since schools became more structured in the early 1900s, much of the scholarship regarding modern school tracking and streaming began in the late 1980s. Most of the research around tracking is situated in the U.S. context, and it is difficult to find relevant work that is rooted specifically in Ontario. Student voices are also missing throughout the literature, which is a driving force behind this research study. In this section, I follow the evolution of the relevant literature from the late 1980s to today, considering the themes that have emerged from a combination of developing scholarship and an increasingly globalized world, and seeking the student perspectives that I think are vital to an understanding of this complex problem.

Origins of the conversation: Tracking in Secondary Schools

The late 1980s and early 1990s were the beginning of contemporary research questioning and criticizing the practice of tracking and streaming students in public education, although critiques regarding the way students experience the school system had existed for many years. Early literature in the field includes critiques of tracking, as well as benefits and positive outcomes of tracking systems. Student perspective is nonexistent, as this is both the beginning of
the literature critiquing tracking, and precedes the movement toward student-centered education and student input.

Although tracking is a generally accepted, standard structure, early research asserted that it is actually not valuable for high-tracked students and is a detriment to low-tracked students (Oakes, 1987). An important element of early tracking research focused on what determines track placement (Oakes, 1987, Hallinan, 1994). A study by Gamoran (1992) found that even when students are given a choice about their track, they are heavily influenced by other factors (i.e. teachers, school officials, etc). He also finds, in some studies, that tracking can influence the polarization of students around issues of discipline and engagement. Hallinan (1994) draws attention to some of these complex issues, including the non-academic factors that influence placement of students (i.e. scheduling conflicts, teacher opinion), a greater proportion of minority and low-income students in lower tracks, and the social hierarchy that emerges from tracking. Hallinan’s claims reflect my own lived experience, where I often see the students with the least agency – marginalized along lines of race, socio-economics, parental support, etc. – in the applied and locally developed pathways.

Not all researchers agree with this assertion that tracking is a practice that benefits only elites, however. Slavin (1990) contradicts Oakes’ findings, suggesting that tracking has essentially no effect; yet even in this lack of results is the challenge for those who defend the practice to find firm ground on which to do so. Further, the concept of “no effect” is limited to achievement effects and does not account for personal dimensions of learning or wellbeing, such as self-esteem or engagement in learning, or post-secondary goals.

To escape from the conventional tracked arrangement of schooling requires a fundamental re-conceptualizing of the system for teachers. The practice itself consists of the grouping of students who seem to have similar needs; the two forms it often takes are both curriculum tracking (nominally college, vocational, and general) and ability grouping (different levels for different abilities, such as advanced, general, and remedial). This structuring theoretically supports teachers, who are thus able to adjust their teaching methods to the common denominator. As an organizational practice, tracking is intended to increase effectiveness and efficiency of instruction (by grouping like students, the teacher can supposedly teach most effectively) (Hallinan, 1994). Hallinan suggests an alternative to completely eliminating tracking,
as it does have benefits; she suggests it is perhaps more important to examine how the other negative outcomes can be mitigated to retain tracking without penalizing learners. However, before this can occur, it is essential to understand how learners are impacted by these structural decisions.

Similarly, Slavin (1990) proposes that changing tracking or grouping practices without changing instructional practices will not have the intended result for student achievement, because problems of diverse achievement (or non-achievement) cannot be reduced to such simple terms, an acknowledgement that draws attention to the complex nature of achievement and student learning. If we accept that schools are oppressive institutions, changing the ways that we group students will not erase the existent biases (for example, in curriculum and instruction) that limit the opportunity of oppressed students.

Tracking also has implications for the organization of teachers and staff, resulting in a hierarchy typically reflective of seniority and experience. Oakes (1987) raises an alarming question about the distribution of resources, and suggests that "We know little about the allocation of resources to various track levels, but several examples support a general sense that teacher and resource quality are more generously distributed to higher tracks" (p. 141). Oakes’ point is troubling but its consequences and the actual impact on students remains obscure and difficult to measure, as the concept of teacher quality is a multidimensional concept unto itself. Nonetheless, teachers who are considered most competent tend to be allocated for the highest-tracked classes, thus the students who have the highest needs learn from less competent instructors.

This is a growing challenge in Ontario, where young teachers have faced increasingly transient work due to a shortage of teaching jobs. Many young teachers now face a reality of several years of temporary positions before they can secure long-term employment in one school. This revolving door effect often results in the newest teachers being placed with difficult classes and complex learning needs, as more experienced, senior teachers are placed in academically strong classrooms. The distribution affects the likelihood of public education providing struggling students with opportunities to improve their life trajectories or even to have a positive learning experience in classes. Overall, differences between students that may have initially been small are exacerbated by tracking, but there is no sense of whether the students actually notice
these differences or what their perception of this hierarchy is like. Through my work at the social services agency, my teaching career, and my OISE education, I began to wonder whether students were sensitive to these differences, and how acutely they felt them in their daily lives.

The early work in this field provides a vocabulary for the topic (i.e. distinctions between types of tracking, tracking factors, tracking outcomes) and establishes the key concerns in the major conversations about tracking. Looking at one factor, such as achievement, is too simple for a complex topic that is both influenced by and influences many factors; other effects, such as course selection and the availability of courses across a variety of tracks, must also be considered. It is also important to determine not only whether tracking is detrimental, but also to determine whether tracking is productive, valuable, and beneficial - and the importance of placing the burden of proof on those who are most likely to benefit even slightly from the practice. Although these measures help to provide an understanding of the influences and measurable outcomes of the system, they fail to account for the experiences of students while they are actually experiencing the consequences of tracking. The early scholarship in the field also raises the concern that tracking is not the only practice that marginalizes and oppresses students, and that changing the structure of student grouping will not fix the problem if instruction does not change; similarly, the experiences of all students can be improved not only by eliminating tracking, but also from improving the potential for instruction, school organization, teacher support, etc. to work against the negative effects of tracking. Student voices are missing from this foundation, which gives a quantitative understanding of the issue but lacks in lived experience.

Specific Learner Groups

Grouping also exists to target particular learner groups, including gifted children and in specific disciplines like mathematics and science. The designation of specific grouping structures for particular learner groups is driven by the idea that these students deserve a separate learning program because of their special learning needs. Some research (Rogers, 1991) suggests that grouping or tracking supports positive outcomes for gifted students, including accelerated learning, and that programs of enrichment/acceleration have the most significant measurable effect on student learning (Kulik & Kulik, 1992). However, the research does not address the tendency of gifted programs to exclude racialized and/or poor students. Although the Kuliks
claim that specialized grouping is important and beneficial for students with specific learning needs and ultimately, the research still reinforces the idea that grouping benefits a small cohort of students and that it is inequitable.

Fiedler, Lange, and Winebrenner’s (1993) work suggests that in the past, tools for identifying gifted students were inefficient and elitist, but that the tools have been improved and should not be so exclusionary anymore. They argue that “Interestingly, educators have no qualms about identifying outstanding talent in athletics and providing specialized programs for students who excel in that area” (p. 89). Although this is true, this recalls the controversy of specialized programming like SHSM programs and programs of choice, which are often populated by students who have already had privileged life experiences (for example, the violinist who joins the “Stage and Screen” SHSM or the minor hockey star who joins the Hockey Program). Spade, Columba, and Vanfossen (1997) suggest that overall, schools can improve learning for all students by offering more demanding classes and encouraging all students to take higher-level courses (p. 124). The importance of positive expectations is a common truism of modern education, but the lack of student voices in this study leaves room for doubt; do students benefit from these high expectations? What effect does it have on their achievement and their experiences at school?

Spade, Columba and VanFossen (1997) suggest that

a laissez-faire policy in higher social-class districts may increase students' opportunities to enroll in higher-level courses (Useem 1992b), but not in working-class schools, where the backgrounds and experiences of parents often do not provide the information necessary to assess their children's potential in the school system. (p. 124)

This alludes to social reproduction, as it suggests working-class parents are not equipped to help their children make choices that will improve their life trajectories. Spade, Columba and VanFossen’s work focuses on influences affecting track choice (parents, teachers, guidance, and “objective” measures), points to school-based concerns for tracking choices, and emphasizes the importance of schools offering a variety of courses to encourage students to improve their learning and their opportunities. Although the study claims that these parents are ill-equipped to help their children make choices to improve their life trajectories, it does not include the voices of these parents or students; it repeats the same disenfranchisement that they describe in their
study. Spade, Columba, and VanFossen also claim that "course taking is the most powerful factor affecting students' achievement that is under the school's control" (p. 125), a sentiment that affirmed my interest in the subject and in its potential to provide students with increased life chances.

Equity and Diversity

Mirroring a growing public concern for diversity and human rights, tracking research began to develop an equity focus, including concerns of race and class. This equity lens explores implications for trajectories, interpersonal relationships, and inequality. Khmelkov and Hallinan (1999) attempted to explore how the organization of schools can shape race relations among students, including friendships, attitudes, and behaviours towards others. The research was driven by a concern for de/segregated schools, and for reintegration; tracking is not only classed but racialized, and the researchers’ interpersonal attraction theory in particular also refers to social class and the potential for class mobility (i.e. the idea that a friendship between a lower-status person and a higher-status person can improve the status of the lower-status individual). The work reflects my own observation that friendships and relationships in schools are often divided by the pathways that students enroll in; academic students are friends with other academic students, applied students with applied students, and enrichment students with other enrichment students. Tracking thus has other implications for students in schools, as it affects not only students’ academic achievement, but their social networks (which, as Khmelkov and Hallinan propose, can impact social mobility).

Tracking is a complex problem as it has a domino or ripple effect, creating a plethora of issues for students, teachers, and administrators who are involved with the system. These problems may be insidious and difficult to separate out, and are not solely a reflection of tracking itself (i.e. students whose social capital allows them to engage more satisfactorily with curriculum, or teacher instruction which reflects traditionally "academic" course material). Ansalone (2003) suggests that although lower-tracked students may experience disengagement with curricula based on their own lack of capital, "On the other hand, the slight benefit to higher-track students may be the result of subtle processes occurring within the tracks rather than the tracking itself” (p.9). Thus, my study considers both the effects of tracking itself and its secondary consequences, such as the impact on social networks and student self-esteem.
Ansalone reiterates the importance of setting high expectations for students, ensuring that instructional quality is not down-graded in accordance with course streams, and that material is challenging, incorporates so-called "higher-order" thinking skills (a contentious idea itself) and avoids simplistic, traditional instructional strategies such as rote memorization, repetition, drilling, etc.

Conversations about the impact of tracking on performance and tracking’s relationship to inequality are also major concerns in this field of study. The results suggest that early tracking increases educational inequality (Hanushek and Wößmann, 2006). While less clear, there is also a tendency for early tracking to reduce mean performance. Similarly, the work of Brunello and Checchi (2007) suggests that tracking does reinforce the impact of family background on education and labour market, especially over longer lengths of time. Hanushek and Wößmann’s (2006) work further advises that one of the challenges of analyzing tracking, especially in empirical investigations, is to separate the influence of tracking from other influences. This points to the value of qualitative research in the tracking field, as it can incorporate student perspectives and may be able to speak to some of the complexities in detail.

Hanushek and Wößmann (2006) posit that much of the early achievement inequality that appears is linked to family background, and that many track placements are also associated with family background, reflecting Spade, Columba, and VanFossen's (1997) suggestion that parents have the greatest impact on children's tracking decisions, especially in less advantaged families, and that the parents may not be equipped to help their children effectively choose courses that will help them to improve their life trajectories. This extends beyond the idea of parent support or involvement; not only is it important for students to have involved parents, but the parents must also be knowledgeable enough for their involvement to have a positive impact.

Brunello and Checchi's (2007) work seems to suggest also that tracking prevents some students from progressing to post-secondary schooling (which they call "tertiary education"). The work suggests that if de-tracking is ultimately impossible because of sacrifices to efficiency, perhaps a constructive step would include policy interventions at a young age that help to offset deficits due to parental background. Another study suggests that ultimately, delaying when tracking begins and keeping all students in "academic" education for longer seems to improve the likelihood of students to enter pre-university courses, even in homes where parents' academic
achievement was limited (suggesting that public education, with delayed tracking, could help to increase students' academic upward mobility, if not social mobility) (Malamud and Pop-Eleches, 2011). This raises questions about whether students’ post-secondary plans are most influenced by their public school achievement, their parents, or their own desires, and whether students feel like any of these factors carries more or less weight.

Detracking

The final piece of the tracking puzzle is detracking, which much of the research gestures to but does not explore in depth. Detracking is a process of dismantling tracking systems and procedures to place all students in heterogeneous classes. As with any complex problem, there are stakeholders who wish to see the practice upheld. Argys, Rees, and Brewer (1996) contradict much of the previous research that has been done that suggests detracking would benefit those at the bottom and have little effect on those at the top; they propose that those at the top would lose a statistically significant amount. The researchers suggest that "On net, if all students in our sample were placed in heterogeneous classes, average scores in mathematics could be expected to decline by approximately 2 percent," and they also make links to the national economy, as the gains made by lower-tracked students could not make up for the losses of those at the top (p. 640). Of course, the article notes, this ignores the potential for detracking to have other effects including a decrease in crime and a slowing of the rich-poor gap, and illustrates the tensions between detracking conversations of equity and economy.

This potential for a decrease prompts questions about how students in the highest-tracked classes view their peers in lower-tracked classes, and whether they feel that those peers have a negative influence on them when they are in the few heterogeneous classes offered in Ontario high schools. Certainly, these heterogeneous classes have a reputation among teachers as being more difficult to manage; finding a balance of materials that are not too challenging yet not too easy, managing the behaviour issues that occur in a classroom with a diverse range of skills, and navigating the social conflicts that arise from students who are not regularly in classrooms together.

One of the primary reasons I am concerned with tracking in public education is due to a concern for the limitations it places on students’ social mobility, especially those students whose families are already living in desperate situations, or who exist on the margins of society. Hall's
2012 study found that reform increased student eligibility for university but did not actually result in more university enrollments or graduations. The study shows that students in the vocational track did not experience an increase in earnings later in life as a result; contrary to my own expectations, more time in “academic” study did not seem to positively benefit these students. Also, students who entered the longer (3-year) program with a low GPA experienced a higher dropout rate. This discovery suggests that more time in an "academic" track may actually be detrimental to some students.

Some classes may be ideally situated to be detracked due to the course’s subject matter. Hyland (2006) suggests that social studies classes are ideal for detracking because they are already concerned with teaching principles of democracy and equality. Civics, a half-credit compulsory course in Ontario, is one of the few mandatory, heterogeneous classes required for the OSSD. Hyland (2006) suggests that introducing heterogeneous composition would "provide low-income children access to information about how to create social change and participate in our political system" (p. 67). This also unites students across race and class divides and gives opportunities for "all students to develop an understanding of the lives of students unlike themselves and participate fully in a pluralistic democracy (Hyland, 2006, p. 67). This prompts the question of whether students in grade ten Civics or Careers classes do in fact socialize across the lines of their tracks, or whether they continue to build relationships with peers from their other classes.

The Ontario Context

Very little research exists about tracking in Ontario, especially recent work. Curtis, Livingstone and Smaller’s *Stacking the Deck* was published in 1992 and attempts to explore how different education is across the various streams. The authors employ a "Class-power approach - one which combines some aspects of both structures-of-dominance and elite-politics theories" which reflects my own concerns with class dynamics and elitism in the public school system (Curtis, Livingstone, & Smaller, 1992, p. 20). The authors explore some of the unequal effects of streaming and raise the topic of mobility when they discuss that “Employers’ and professional-class kids are much more likely to go to university than are working-class kids - somewhere between two-and-a-half to four times as likely" (Curtis, Livingstone, & Smaller, 1992, p. 10). This inequality plays out in many ways, as I often see my own working-class and
poor students opt out of opportunities at school because they know their families cannot afford post-secondary education. Anisef, Brown, Sweet, and Walters (2010) identify measurable differences in the achievement of students who were first- and second-generation immigrants and suggests that

Individuals belonging to involuntary minorities, such as groups whose presence in the host country is the result of conquest, colonialism (or neo-colonialism), or slavery, may distrust majority institutions and the dominant culture and may not believe that schooling can really be a way out of poverty. (p. 4)

The characterization of minority groups as mistrusting prompts me to ask questions about how much trust at-risk students have in the school system to give them what they want and need.

The concept of trust is also connected to the idea of agency, as students who inherently mistrust the system will not find agency there to change their own life trajectories. Curtis, Livingstone, and Smaller (1992) also include a valuable discussion of hegemony and its function in the school system, as it is largely related to cultural capital. They also discuss special education and gifted programs as a form of tracking, and about the differences in the ways that genders are streamed. These subtleties have added richness to my own understanding of the ways that students are divided in public school systems.

Again, the effect of expectations and of teacher perception on student identity arises, suggesting that "Clearly, when students realize that less is expected of them by their teachers, they often see no point in trying to challenge this expectation (see, for example, Brophy, 1983)" (Curtis, Livingstone, and Smaller, 1992, p. 61). This caused me to wonder whether students are conscious of differences in treatment and in teachers’ commitment depending on track.

Curtis et al. (1992) also discuss specialized programmes such as French immersion and enrichment which, along with other special programs,

served as unofficial, but significant forms of streaming within school boards. For example, a classroom teacher in a senior elementary school pointed to a special instrumental music programme in his school, apparently well-known across the city, as providing preferred treatment for certain students…. Finally, as with the "gifted"
classes, there were a number of concerns raised about the movement of resources away from the regular classes to the benefit of the special immersion classes. (p. 68)

The allocation of resources in the form of both materials (books, materials, classroom spaces) and human resources (more experienced teachers, guest speakers, trips) is problematic but unfortunately not groundbreaking. The researchers also connect to Jean Anyon's (1981) work which found "profound differences in the [formal] curriculum and the curriculum-in-use" among these five schools" (in Curtis, Livingstone, & Smaller, 1992, p. 71). This raises important questions about the differences in what students learn in the classroom, not just how they learn and/or if they learn, and whether they feel that their curriculum is different from the curriculum of students in other tracks.

Gaps

Generally, one of the biggest gaps in this research is the lack of student voices and student perspectives. Although some concerns do not exist at the individual student level, such as the organization of student bodies into classes, it is difficult to assess what students’ experiences are like. Much research has been done about the beginning and the end – factors influencing which tracks students are placed in, and their outcomes afterward – but very little work has engaged with the process in between. This middle gap has implications for the outcomes and should not be ignored. An exploration of this middle gap should also clarify whether the effects of tracking are in fact negligible, or whether they should be given more attention and consideration. Further, most of the research has been quantitative in nature, even economically-driven, and more qualitative research is needed to describe the effects of the process and opportunities for growth and change.
Chapter 3
Methodology

The Autobiographical Turn

At this point in my intersecting academic and professional careers, it is important to me to acknowledge that teaching is undeniably a political and personal act. Further, I acknowledge that my role as a teacher is influenced by my own experiences in the public education system. This manner of thinking is influenced by Pinar’s description of the autobiographical component of research, where “one takes special notice of one’s past life-in-schools, with one’s past life-with-schoolteachers and one’s past life-with-books and other school-related artifacts” (Pinar as cited in Cooper & White, 2012, p. 36). As an elementary and high school student, I excelled in school and played the school game well; my experiences with the public education system were generally positive. Though I benefited from my privilege as a white person, I am also from a working-class family, and overcame barriers to proceed to post-secondary education in a “professional” field. I can relate to students balancing part-time jobs and schoolwork, opting out of activities with their peers because of cost, and having uncomfortable conversations at home about course fees or school requests for money. I can connect with students who elect to go to college instead of university because of tuition and expenses; the cost of a year of university was jaw-dropping, in my home, and the cause of a lot of tension. My position gives me an understanding of some of the ways that socio-economics and other forms of privilege shape public education, and a frustration with the ways that public education sorts, labels, and limits our students in ways that are often both invisible and seemingly insurmountable.

I also believe that it is possible to conceive of a world where public education provides students with opportunity and mobility. In the words of action researcher Stephen Kemmis (2006),

I believe emphatically that it is not utopian to hope for education that emancipates students, teachers and societies from irrational forms of thinking, unproductive ways of working, unsatisfying forms of life for teachers or students or their families, or from unjust forms of social relationships in schools or societies. (p. 463)

These politics motivate my approach to the research.
Research Questions

Student pathway selection and course placement often affect the ways that teachers talk about and treat their students. Separating students into university-, college-, and workplace-bound pathways often results in conceptualizing students from a deficit perspective, where university-bound students are more skilled and capable of more challenging work and college- and workplace-bound students are less skilled and in greater need of assistance. Cone (2002) suggests that when teachers avoid giving students challenging texts and assignments, they imply to students that they are not ready to learn or to be excited by school, which results in poor attendance, disruptive classroom behaviour and low educational drive (p. 2). This mirrors my own experience as a teacher of many applied and locally developed students.

Focusing on student weaknesses and inabilities can become a dangerous habit, and can also lead teachers to forget the importance of positive expectations. Achinstein (2002) refers to another effect of low expectations, which gives teachers an "out;" through conversations which cast students as "problem students," teachers make students the root of the problem and absolve themselves of responsibility (Achinstein, 2002, p. 434). The teachers in Achinstein's study classified the students as problems to be removed - a static, immutable label that allowed for no change or growth of any kind.

I began to wonder how much students were conscious of streaming itself, as well as its effects. I was curious about how they experienced this structure, whether they were frustrated with the system, or whether they simply accepted it. In my research, I explored the following questions:

1. What are students’ experiences of and perspectives on streaming?
   a. Why do students believe they are in the specific streams that they are in, and what do they think of these streams?
   b. What and/or who influenced their placements as they entered these streams?
2. What impact does being in a particular stream have on students’ academic self-concepts and sense of self-esteem?
   a. What impact does streaming seem to have on students’ post-secondary plans for further education and/or work?
These questions are specifically student-centered, in an effort to re-orient the research and include student voices, a perspective that has been largely ignored by previous research on tracking and streaming. I explored the ways that students perceive themselves in relation to and as different from kids in other streams, and how they connect (or do not connect) the curriculum to their own lives.

**Approach: Practitioner inquiry**

Qualitative research fills in the gaps left by quantitative research, which does not capture the stories or the lived experiences of its subjects. I appreciate the ways in which practitioner inquiry validates the knowledge of teachers in classrooms and contributes to the esteem of the profession, at a time when there is a growing erosion of teacher autonomy and respect from the public. Practitioner research also demonstrates the value of local knowledge, and of qualitative research, during an increasingly neo-liberal political era that seems preoccupied with quantitative measures and “big data.” Cummins (2009) suggests that educational policy-making in the United States and elsewhere has been dominated in recent years by the perspective that only quantitative research is relevant to policy and only experimental and quasiexperimental studies can generate causal inferences about the effect of a treatment or instructional program…[however] ethnographic and case study data contribute to theory and knowledge generation in two ways. First, this research establishes phenomena that require explanation… The second way in which qualitative data contribute to knowledge generation derives from the fact that any phenomenon established credibly by observation (qualitative or quantitative) can refute theoretical propositions or policy-related claims. (p. 40)

Further, doing qualitative research further verifies the power of individual stories and provides faces for what is often large-scale, broad, provincially-generated policy. Campano (2007) suggests that students and teachers write “not only from experience but also for experience; storytelling becomes an ongoing process of inquiry and discovery that is potentially generative” (p. 18).

I am also engaging in qualitative research because of its narrative qualities. Narrative research accounts “tell of individual experiences, and they may shed light on the identities of
individuals and how they see themselves” (Cresswell, 2007, p. 71). Because the research about tracking has been so input- and outcome-based, student identities and how they see themselves as a part of the tracking experience have been ignored. Using elements of narrative research will allow me to “captur[e] the detailed stories or life experiences of a single individual or the lives of a small number of individuals” (Cresswell, 2007, p. 74). Seeing the stories from inside the classroom, instead of from the outside as an objective observer, comes from my position as a practitioner researcher.

While I worked in the social work field, one of the guiding principles was “Nothing about them without them,” meaning that we attempted to not make plans for clients without involving them in the decision-making process. I have tried to carry this over into my teaching practice, and I am fortunate to be teaching at a time when student-teacher collaboration and redistribution of power are popular topics that are gaining traction. My employment history also influences my interest in practitioner inquiry, as I believe this approach similarly attempts to work with students and within sites of inquiry, and often seeks to disrupt conventional power relationships.

My choice to use practitioner inquiry as my methodology is heavily influenced by the work of Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle, and their concept of inquiry as a stance. The idea of an inquiry stance appeals to me for many reasons, especially because of its concern for interrogating conventional practices and validating teachers as researchers. An inquiry stance “involves a continual process of making current arrangements problematic questioning the ways knowledge and practice are constructed, evaluated, and used; and assuming that part of the work of practitioners individually and collectively is to participate in educational and social change” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 121). The concept of inquiry as a stance encourages me to constantly assess both my own practice and pedagogy, and the practices and structures I participate in and promote. Campano (2007) states that

Adapting an inquiry stance into my work did entail a sustained commitment to exploring moments of dissonance and frustration as opportunities for professional growth. (p. 113)

Instead of accepting the status quo, teachers “must adopt a more skeptical stance toward dominant explanations of student failure, such as the notion of talent and ability, or the subtle and not so subtle insinuations of cultural or class superiority” (p.110).
I am also motivated by the social justice aspects of practitioner research, as it is “social and political in the sense of deliberating about what to get done, why to get it done, who decides, and whose interests are served” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 121). The connection to concerns for agency and power reflect the heart of my critique about tracking and its tendency to disable students’ agency and individual potential. I wanted to use practitioner inquiry for this study as a means of harnessing the potential of my position in the classroom to have a positive impact on my school and students, beginning with understanding tracking and streaming better, and to solidify my understanding of my own profession as one of both practitioner and researcher. I wanted to improve my ability to talk to students about their track choices and advocate for my students’ pathway and life choices with colleagues and administrators. Finally, I wanted to better understand the impact of track placement on student engagement, and to understand the way it influences their sense of self, ability to self-advocate, their social mobility, and process of making sense of the world.

Research Methods

Finding student voices

Initially, I envisioned myself using anonymous surveys for this project. I was concerned with gathering the input of as many students as possible, so that I could feel confident in the validity of my data. This may be a symptom of the era I grew up in and now teach in; Big Data has a powerful grip on our society, and especially on the education field. It was also my school board’s preferred option, as student identity would be protected and it seemed to ensure objectivity. In drafting my proposal, however, I found myself writing about the importance of story, classroom experience, and student voice, and anonymous survey data did not seem to match the richness that I was seeking, or the detail that would fill in the gaps I had found in my review of the literature. I decided to use semi-structured interviews, to access the input of the students whose lives I was so curious about, and to gain a better understanding of their stories. One of my great concerns with quantitative research is the stories that it misses or leaves out; having done a lot of work with youth on the margins, I understand the effect of excluding or sidelining these voices. I wanted to talk to the marginalized students whose identities and lives are often not represented, and uncover the stories that usually go unspoken.
Research Design and Rationale

I conducted semi-structured 20-50-minute interviews with nine students across grade eleven English classes: three enriched, three university (academic) and three college (applied). I decided not to interview students from the locally developed pathway, as it is a statistically small group of students. I interviewed grade eleven students because they have experienced at least two full years of being tracked in high school, and because in grade ten, they select their course pathways for their senior years. Grade eleven is an important year as some students have transitioned from academic to applied and their selections for their senior years of high school influence where they are able to go after they graduate high school (only students with “University” credits can apply to Ontario universities, although students with university credits can also choose to attend college or enter the work force). The Ministry of Education (2015) also stresses the importance of the grade ten year, stating that “Research shows that the successful completion of sixteen credits by the end of Grade ten keeps students on track to graduate with their peers” (Ontario Ministry of Education, para. 3). Grade ten is thus a critical year for student achievement and student choices, and students in the early months of grade eleven have a valuable vantage point for reflection and understanding. It would also have made sense to interview grade ten students, but as I was teaching a large proportion of the grade ten students in my school during the time I conducted this inquiry, it was not ethically possible.

Recruitment

I recruited participants through a letter distributed through my colleagues at school (see Appendix 1). I sought participation from nine students (college, university, and enriched). The heterogeneity of the participants is represented to some degree by their pathway “level,” although other diversity (racial, gender, socio-economic, etc.) emerged. I interviewed an odd number of students, but attempted to have some gender diversity in each category (either two males and one female, or two females and one male participant for each pathway). My English department colleagues announced my project to their grade eleven classes and encouraged those who were interested to participate.
Research Participants and Demographic Information

<table>
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<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
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<tr>
<td>Jeremy</td>
<td>University/Academic</td>
<td>Male</td>
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Data Collection

The data was collected through in-person interviews that I recorded digitally, using computer software, and transcribed using word processing software. Data collection took place over one month at our school during breaks and after school, and my transcription of the interviews followed. Names and identifying details have been changed throughout this project to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

I conducted the interviews in the classroom where I teach, at times that were convenient to students. Some students met with me at lunchtime (we have a short, 50-minute common lunch period for all students in the school), while others met with me immediately following the school day. Interviews lasted between 20 minutes and 50 minutes, depending on how much students

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3 A lot of the research on streaming, especially the most recent research, includes a commentary on the race politics of streaming. Some of the research critiques streaming as an oppressive practice that is systemically racist, and maintains the oppression of racialized students and minorities. I did not collect racial information about my participants, and did not discuss race in the interview questions, for several reasons. Firstly, it is difficult to collect this data in public schools in Ontario. Further, this is a small sample size and information about race would not have accurately represented the school’s population, or the population of the city, or the school board. In addition, as I wanted to focus my research more on student experiences than on the system itself, these questions would have been out of place; although I left room for students to discuss their experiences as racialized persons, they did not emerge in the conversations.
spoke during the conversation. We were alone in the classroom, although other students and adults were typically around, in the hallways and neighbouring classrooms.

I began each interview by reminding them that it was part of my thesis project for my Master’s degree, and clarified any questions. I explained how the information would be stored, the transcription and writing process, and reminded them that their names and any identifying information would be kept private for them. I thanked students for their participation in the project, asked them to take any breaks or pauses that they needed throughout the interview, and explained that they could return to any questions throughout the process if they wanted to elaborate. I also had students perform a test run with the recording equipment.

In most of the interviews, I reminded students at various points that I was not judging them as individuals by their answers, and encouraged them to speak freely. Some students were highly concerned about the ways that they would be perceived by me or by others, especially when they felt they were being snobby or cruel in their comments. I attempted to assuage these fears by reminding them that the information they provided was important data for the project.

At the end of the interview, I informed students that once my work was polished and submitted, I planned to share it with them in a small group setting, so that they could see the final project. Even the students who were self-described non-readers, or not interested in school, wanted to see the results of the project. Many students stayed after the interview had officially ended to ask about the project and about my graduate studies. Some were interested in the project itself and its goals, some were interested in what I was studying in graduate school, some asked about why I was pursuing a Master’s degree, and some simply marveled at the idea of voluntarily continuing with schooling after I had a career and a job. These conversations made me wish that I had more time to talk to not only the students who participated in my research project, but all students that I teach; valuable connections can be made when the formal constructs of the classroom are removed.

The information from these interviews, in the form of audio files, is stored on an encrypted external hard drive which is in a secure, locked location. The transcriptions and rough versions of this thesis are also found in the same location.
Data Analysis

I coded the data using grounded theory analysis, developing labels and categories as I read through and processed the survey data. The codes are a researcher’s terms, and coding is a process of “giving names to patterns [they] see in the data” (Freeman, 1998, p. 100). In a grounded analysis, the researcher is “uncovering what may be in the data,” finding what is interesting by looking for what emerges as important (Freeman, 1998, p. 103). When performing grounded analysis, “The most basic operations which provide the basis for category building are coding and the constant comparison of data, codes, and the emerging categories” (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 193). When going through this process, categories emerge and the

emergence of categories should be supported by the ‘constant comparative method’: while coding, the analyst constantly compares the already coded incidents (which usually means the text segments which relate to the incidents) with each other and with incidents not yet coded. (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 194).

This research project was specifically designed to gather previously undocumented student perspectives about tracking, filling in gaps left by other research that prioritized numbers, outcomes, and the voices of parents, administrators, parents, etc. Conducting interviews to render this perspective thus made sense, and led me to qualitative research. Researchers conduct qualitative research because they “need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue. This detail can only be established by talking directly with people…allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature” (Creswell, 2013, p. 48). Qualitative research often collects data in its natural setting, uses the researcher as an important instrument, and includes a dimension of reflexivity, among other characteristics (Creswell, 2013, p. 47). Qualitative study also recognizes that

the initial plan for research cannot be tightly prescribed, and that all phases of the process may change or shift after the researchers enter the field and begin to collect data…The key idea behind qualitative research is to learn about the problem or issue from participants and engage in the best practices to obtain that information. (Creswell, 2013, p. 47)

The emphasis on learning about the problem from the participants was especially important and influential in the development of the research design. Further, using grounded analysis
instead of an a priori analysis made sense, as it was important to me to remain open to surprises in the data and allow these unexpected answers to expose new ideas, especially as this research is driven by a desire to uncover previously unexplored student voices and opinions. To some degree, the codes emerged from consistent topics and key words as students were responding to many questions that were the same or similar, and so they used similar language and topics in their responses. In my past research endeavours, I have found that often the most interesting answers emerge from unpredicted areas and lines of thinking; this was especially important as I sought to include the student perspectives that have been sidelined by other research, and represented elements of the experience that I had not considered.

Several categories emerged from the data: division, intelligence, learning, influences, and uncategorized outliers. Outliers, as the pieces that do not fit neatly into a category, also have importance; they can “provide important insights about [the] analysis; they can show [researchers] where the interpretation [they] are building is weak or incomplete, and how it needs to be redirected” (Freeman, 1998, p. 100). Bryant and Charmaz (2007) discuss these responses with more intricacy:

participants who have not responded in the anticipated way, or who have opposite reactions to the majority to a particular phenomenon, are called negative cases. In grounded theory, negative cases are not discarded, but rather integrated into the emerging theory. Negative cases are therefore a part of the sampling process, and cannot simply be ignored or discarded…The trick in grounded theory is therefore to determine the differences between a negative case and what quantitative researchers refer to as an outlier. Outliers are serendipitous errors, and if the participant is a true outlier, in both qualitative and quantitative inquiry, can be ignored, for example in our study of nurse-patient negotiation and gift giving. (p. 240-241)

In my research, the negative cases ended up acting like a signpost to a subtle issue that came up in the work.

Ethical Considerations

Although I am often highly aware of the power dynamics I participate in, I certainly do not have them mastered or thoroughly understood. As Lecompte (1995) states, "If earlier, more
traditional, applied researchers struggled with knowledge utilization and how and where to collaborate, contemporary educational researchers are finally learning that they must struggle with issues of power" (p. 101). Unfortunately, this is not a problem that can or should be corrected, as it seems the most useful and genuine approach is to become comfortable in the struggle (and 'work the dialectic'). Ontario teachers are trained in the Bachelor of Education program to assume denotative positions of neutrality in the classroom, as if this can ever be possible, and the thought of becoming active, radical or political is frightening and highly discouraged. However, what I choose to study is itself a value-laden decision, and "part of the issue of power in research is that inquiry – or investigation – is a political process, informed by multiple subjectivities, possessed of multiple entrenched interests, and framed in multiple agendas" (Lecompte, 1995, p. 102). I firmly believe that my relationships with my students are central to success in the classroom, and these relationships are of the utmost importance to me. It is therefore imperative that I value and respect these relationships as both a teacher and researcher. Guerrero et al's (2013) idea of actively stripping away socially constructed roles appeals to me, as it captures that in contemporary qualitative research, we cannot simply declare our positionality and be done with it (p. 115). Negotiating power relationships must be an ongoing process (as it is, I would argue, in classroom teaching as well, especially in situations of evaluation and behaviour management). As Zeni (2001) suggests, "We aren’t outsiders peering from the shadows into the classroom, but insiders responsible to the students whose learning we document" (p. 154). Although I believe strongly in the importance of my learning/work at OISE - I do believe it is making me a better educator — I cannot ignore that in my heart, my primary obligation is to my students, as their teacher.

As I conducted research in the school I teach at, my rapport with my participants was unique⁴. The way that students see me undoubtedly impacted my research, regardless of whether I knew them personally before the interview. Students whom I knew from teaching them in

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⁴ This project was approved by the University of Toronto’s Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education Research Ethics Board, and by the Grand Erie District School Board’s System Research Leader/Managing Information for Student Achievement representative.
previous years may have felt more comfortable with me, as we already had student-teacher relationships in place. Students whom I knew from extracurricular and school activities do not know me as a classroom teacher and may have been more hesitant about sharing with me honestly; at the same time, as a person who currently has little impact or connection to their lives, they may have been genuine in their replies as I currently have no visible impact on their lives. Additionally, some students were interested in this project and seemed to perceive my work as a sign that I was highly invested in the wellbeing and achievement of students, and were heavily invested in their interviews, giving great detail in their responses and making sure that I understood their ideas.
Chapter 4
Doing School Well

Introduction

In my interviews with students, I asked them to think about and describe the differences between themselves and their peers with specific regard to school and classes. Although my questions were broad and general, many students talked about three qualities: intelligence, learning, and work habits. They discussed who was considered the smartest, a complex term and concept with a legacy of research unto itself. They talked about learning, and who learned “best” and fastest, as though it was a race that some students could win and others simply got through. Finally, they talked about work habits; curiously, this confounded their ideas about intelligence, as many of them discussed how they could be smart if they would only work harder, suggesting that this concept of smartness as a fixed quality is not quite as plain as it seems. The ways that students dealt with school also spilled over into their social relationships, as explored in the following chapter.

In this chapter, I report on the findings about how students theorize what it means to be smart, their thoughts about learning, and about work habits at school. Students discussed how some students were considered more intelligent than others, and the implications for those assumptions. They also talked about learning, and how learning is a component of how we theorize smartness. Finally, they discussed work habits and how students’ work habits factor into whether others consider them smart or successful.

Intelligence: “Depends on like, what you think smart is”

Intelligence and what it means to be smart is an oft-debated concept in the education world. Bachelor of Education programs and professional development incorporate various intelligence theories, including more commonly known models like Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence theory or Bloom’s Taxonomy, and more complex examples like theories of cultural capital (see Gardner, 1993; Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956; Seaman, 2011; Bourdieu in Richardson, 1986, p. 46-58).
Despite these models, which are inherently based on complex models of intelligence, schools seem to fall back on standard, one-dimensional definitions of intellect. Sternberg’s (2007) ground-breaking work exploring the idea of intelligence suggests that teachers judge children’s abilities and achievements on the basis of implicit theories of intelligence that often are excessively narrow (see Ladson-Billings, 1997). This narrowness is in part a function of their own socialization as teachers, in education schools and afterward, and in part a function of the tests they are being asked to give, which are based on narrow conceptions of abilities and achievements. But the result is a socioeducational system that is self-perpetuating and that wastes talent because it fails to recognize strengths outside the range of traditional measurements. Children may be viewed as incapable of success despite having the capabilities to succeed. (p.152)

This narrowness is, unsurprisingly, picked up and maintained by students educated in this system. Throughout the interviews, many of the students referred to concepts of intelligence and the idea of being smart. While some students referred to the idea that there are different types of smartness, many students referred to the concept of intelligence as though it is a static, fixed quality. One applied pathway student Mimi stated, “I feel like other students say usually that we’re less smart or we’re not as smart as people that are in academic which is kinda stupid but yeah. That’s usually what they say.” Although some students disagreed with the idea that academic students are actually smarter, almost all agreed that the perception is, generally, that academic students are smarter. For example, Danny suggested that perception did not match the reality of the situation.

**Danny:** Well, I think that generally, when compared with applied students, people perceive the academic students as smarter, and I’m not really sure if that’s actually the case, it’s just what people perceive them to be like.

**Jenna:** And when you say smarter, smarter how?

**Danny:** As in they grasp abstract concepts with more ease, I guess, that is the best way to put it.

**Jenna:** Very specific language. And you said you don’t think that’s accurate?
**Danny:** I don’t think that’s accurate because I know a lot of smart people who take college courses, or I guess, applied courses, because they don’t necessarily need to go to university for what they wanna do.

Jeremy troubled this idea of a static concept of smartness, but made connections with learning habits.

**Jeremy:** Applied… there are smart kids in applied. Depends on like, what you think smart is. There are also other kids that are there because they just don’t wanna do as much work as the academic kids, like oh you have to do an essay already, I’m just reading a book right now. And that type of stuff. And so you usually see more “lazier” kids. But enrichment is the other end of the spectrum, basically, [it] is kids that want work because they wanna prove themselves, kids that wanna be pushed so that their brain develops more I guess, and they’re ready for university.

Andrew also seemed to want to trouble this notion of smartness when he described students in academic, but ultimately returned to the idea of smartness and “brain power”. He said,

They’re, what word do I want… they’re different from people in applied but kind of the same. They’ve got more brain power but there are things they struggle at as well. So you can’t really name them as smarter people, you just have to name them as normal people who are a little smarter than some others. That’s the way I would say it.

The standard, static idea of what it means to be smart is a difficult one to escape from, even as students like Andrew try to find new ways to conceptualize it. Andrew also returned to this concept of intellect when I asked him to describe students in the enriched program. He described these students as “the super smart people who got high 90s in grade school, and always were ready with something smart to say, those kind of people.” This concept of readiness is another interesting detail, adding another dimension – processing speed – to this emerging profile of smartness. One of the most upsetting revelations surfaced when I asked Andrew why he had not followed his grade eight teacher’s recommendation to enter the locally developed pathway. Andrew said he had resisted enrolling in locally developed classes because “back then I thought [if] you were in locally developed you were like a not smart person, everybody thought you were stupid, or mentally challenged. Now I don’t think of that, I think they need extra help.”
Although the portion of students who enter the locally developed pathway is statistically small, the idea that these students enter high school categorized as stupid or even “mentally challenged” – having a recognizable disability – is sobering.

The students suggested that overall, the applied pathway is regarded as the easier of the pathways. For example, Zoe described how “if you think you’re good at math you take academic right away…but if you’re not you’re just like oh I’m just gonna go to applied.” This concept of the applied pathway as the easier version of learning was a persistent theme across the interviews, with many students commenting on the idea that moving from academic to applied was “dropping down,” a theme that reflects the language I hear from many people involved in the education community: teachers, parents, students, administrators, etc. This does not reflect the official language around the differences between applied and academic, as stated in the Ontario curriculum documents. According to documents from the Ministry of Education, “Academic courses emphasize theory and abstract problems. Applied courses focus on practical applications and concrete examples. Both types of courses set high expectations for students while preparing them for studies in the senior grades” (Ontario Secondary Schools Grades 9 to 12, Program and Diploma Requirements, 2011, p. 13). One student, Danny, very clearly articulated the more common, colloquial habit of phrase, describing how “some people perceive individuals in other streams as above or below you.” When I clarified this language around the idea of levels, the connection back to smartness emerged again.

**Jenna:** Ok so when we’re talking above or below, we’re talking about a social hierarchy kind of thing.

**Danny:** Yeah, kind of. Also, it kinda means they perceive these individuals to be dumber than them.

**Jenna:** Ok, so there’s a combination of social but also intellect?

**Danny:** Yeah.

The connections between achievement and smartness were consistent and seemed to resist disruption, and extended into dimensions of learning as well; not only did students refer to how much they or others knew or learned, they also discussed how easily and how well they
learned. Thus, profiles of students who are institutionally labeled as “weak” or “strong” are affected by notions of intelligence and aptitude.

Learning: “You’d rather get good marks in applied than bad marks in academic”

Interviewees referred to connections between smartness and learning, where students who had a more difficult time learning were not as intelligent. Mimi stated that

it’s harder for us to learn, it’s harder for us to do things, rather than [academic pathway students], when they understand things more. But that’s not really true, because…you can get a good job still if you are in applied, it doesn’t matter. And you’d rather get good marks in applied than bad marks in academic, something that you’re not the…strongest in, you know?

Mimi’s language suggests that she views herself and her applied peers as competent and skilled, but views school as a place that values only one particular set of skills that results in good marks.

This also reflects a common occurrence I have seen in public schooling, where adults will encourage struggling students to take classes in the applied pathway where they can theoretically get better marks, instead of in the academic pathway, where their marks may be lower. While I believe this happens with the best intentions in many cases (adults encouraging students to enroll in classes that will help them to be successful and achieve high grades, to assist in post-secondary applications), I think these attempts are at times misguided. First, this immediately limits students’ opportunities post-high school; they will only be eligible to attend college post-high school, although they could of course opt to apply for university later in life. I do not intend to discriminate against the value of career opportunities provided by colleges, but think it is a significant door to close for young people who may be far off from deciding what they want to do, vocationally.

In addition, funneling students into applied pathway classes can have implications for their achievement, their work habits, and their behavior in class. While separating students by ability level is widely held to be for the benefit of both the teachers – who can plan more easily for a homogeneous group – and the students who are high achievers,
tracking is often found to work to the academic detriment of students who are placed in low-ability classes or non-college-preparatory groups (see e.g., reviews by Calfee & Brown, 1979; Esposito, 1973; Findlay & Bryan, 1970; Froman, 1981; Noland, 1985; Rosenbaum, 1980b). Considerable support can be found for the positive effects on the least-able students of membership in heterogeneous classrooms (Esposito, 1973; Madden & Slavin, 1983; Noland, 1985; Persell, 1977; Rosenbaum 1980b; Slavin 1983).” (Oakes, 1987, p. 134)

Oakes also notes that while some tracking seems to provide a benefit for students in the highest tracks, not all research concurs and “controlled students of students taking similar subjects in heterogeneous and homogeneous groups show that high-ability students (like other students) rarely benefit from these tracked settings (see Esposito, 1973; Kulik & Kulik, 1982; Noland 1985, among others)” (Oakes, 1987, p. 133). A study by Argys, Rees, and Brewer (1996) found similar effects, when students in a lower-tracked math class were placed in a heterogeneous class; their grades rose an average of five percentage points. However, they also found that students who were previously separated into a high-tracked class lost two percentage points. This potential positive effect was explored by a recent project, described in a People for Education (2014) report:

In 2011, staff at the Granite Ridge Education Centre (GREC), a small K-12 school outside Kingston, decided to put all grade 9 English students—whether they had chosen applied or academic English—in the same class, with the option of doing the work for either kind of credit. At the end of the year, they found that student behavior had improved, and time on task had increased for all students. Some students who had started in applied were successful in getting the academic credit. (p.6)

Examples like this show that destreaming classes can have a positive effect on all students; they also stress the importance of considering other factors like behavior and time on task, instead of only looking at achievement, when we consider the idea of student success and the opportunities of destreaming classes in our schools.

Work Habits: “Why is academic any different than applied?”

There was also a consistent idea that noted a connection between work habits and intelligence. When I asked Vanessa what people say about students in the applied pathway, this
idea about work habits was a central factor. She said that students who were in applied were perhaps not smart enough to get into the enrichment program, and that they “don’t apply themselves enough.” When I asked whether she agreed, she concurred with the description.

**Vanessa:** My little sister is in enrichment, well she wants to be, she’s getting into the SHSM stuff and enrichment classes and she’s like, “I’m gonna be a lawyer, I’m gonna do all this and that,” and I’m like um cool, I can’t because I’m not smart enough. She’s like “Well, if you started in grade 9 you could do it,” and I’m like, “No I can’t,” and she’s like, “Well maybe applied is where you belong, in your academic level.”

**Jenna:** Ok, so your sister’s kind of echoing your own thoughts about how applied is a result of not trying?

**Vanessa:** Yeah, in a way yeah.

**Jenna:** But you feel you’re not smart enough.

**Vanessa:** In a way yeah, I don’t know how to apply myself. I procrastinate so much I can’t even deal with it.

Vanessa’s tone of voice as she described her feelings of inadequacy was poignant. The idea of “where you belong,” also came up in conversation with Mimi, who said that she had not ever considered moving from the applied pathway to the academic pathway, and never would. Mimi explained, stating

I’m still an applied student. I’m gonna always be an applied student. I can get to that point where I start focusing and doing things more but I’m gonna stay in applied because I feel like that’s where I belong. I feel like I’m a very smart person and I can be very smart but I just don’t push myself to be that smart. So I just I don’t know, I feel like yeah, I’m gonna stick to applied. *(Laughs)* Cause that’s where I belong.

Mimi’s description suggests that smartness is also, to some degree, a performance; she talks about how she *can* be smart but does not push herself to be, suggesting that there is an element of effort and intention to “being smart”. Mimi also refers to where she “belongs.” Vanessa also sounded resigned to her situation when she said, “I wanna have… I literally want a
fairy tale life. I wanna go to college and then just, be good the rest of my life, but that’s never gonna happen.” Although she spoke of wanting to do better in school and to be “good,” the overwhelming feeling throughout her interview was that her placement and her fate was inescapable. The fixedness of these pathway placements is troubling; not only do the students see the placements as accurate, to some degree, they also view these placements as immutable and uncontestable. They buy into the idea that they belong in a category that popular opinion perceives as less smart, less motivated, and less hard-working. The idea of belonging to a certain category has echoes of the innate-difference theories that Curtis, Livingstone and Smaller (1992) refer to, when they suggest that “socially powerful people tend to encourage the less powerful to blame themselves for their own misfortunes. A current argument holds that innate biological differences make some people rich and powerful, others poor and powerless” (p. 14). Mimi and her peers have internalized the idea that life has accurately assigned them to the applied stream, and that resistance to this categorization or hard work to overcome it will be fruitless.

Danny showed great empathy and wisdom when he described in detail the destructiveness of the assumption that applied students do not work as hard as their academic or enriched program peers.

**Danny:** I think it’s from everybody because I’ve heard the phrase “You’re in grade eleven academic now, you should not be doing this in class.” Teachers have said that before. And I don’t understand why academic is part of that phrase. I understand grade eleven because you’re supposed to be more mature now, but why is academic any different than applied? Because I think even teachers themselves treat applied as lesser when they talk to academic students. It kind of makes the applied students feel less motivated to be successful because they know people are ragging on them.

**Jenna:** When people say, “You’re in grade eleven academic, you need to take this more seriously,” is it a behavioural thing? And work habits, or are they talking about intellect?

**Danny:** It’s definitely behavioural and work habits. Because for work habits, people don’t do work and then they get yelled at and told you should be in academic but again, that’s just an issue altogether that you should do work in school, that’s what it should be, honestly.
**Jenna:** Just trying to make sure I don’t misquote you or misunderstand it. So what you’re saying, your teachers say, “You should work harder, because you’re in grade eleven university” which means that they think that in grade eleven college they wouldn’t work as hard? Like if you wanna be in this grade eleven university class you need to work harder?

**Danny:** Not really, I think that because these teachers [are] saying you should work hard because you’re in a university class, they’re obviously going to treat the college students as less just because they’re talking about how great you should be and how great this class is and how hard you should be working because you’re in this stream. So I think that it’s a respect issue, I think that people need to respect people no matter what stream you’re in. I think they need to have respect, just because we’re all people.

**Jenna:** Right. So it should be, you’re in grade eleven, you should do your work. Not you’re in grade eleven university, you should do your work.

**Danny:** Yeah.

Danny’s description is thoughtful and sensitive to the subtle semantics of speech. He picks up on a delicate note when teachers suggest that being in grade eleven “university” classes should indicate a specific sort of behaviour; because teachers are not simply specifying students’ grades, but also mentioning their pathways, he suggests that they associate that stream with a certain type of behaviour or ability. Danny mentions that the teachers are “obviously going to treat the college students as less,” but when I asked in the interviews about how their teachers felt about teaching the different pathway classes, the students did not feel that teachers had negative feelings about teaching the applied pathway. However, this is a difficult issue to tease out, and depends on the students’ ability to read and interpret their teachers’ attitudes. It also may be more connected to the concept of expectations for excellence than teachers’ attitudes or behaviour in class.

**Summary**

Throughout the interviews, students referred frequently to the idea of what it means to be smart. Although many of them tried to disrupt conventional ideas about smartness, they also
agreed that typically, students in the enriched and academic pathways were seen as smarter and the students in the applied pathway were seen as less smart or not smart. They often referred to learning as well, and suggested that students in the applied pathway also have a more difficult time learning. Finally, students talked about work habits, which they correlated with intelligence. Students in applied classes were often portrayed as not working very hard, and not desiring academic success – despite the fact that all of the applied students described how they wanted to do well in school but did not know how to do it. These qualities have implications for the ways students see themselves and each other, and research suggests that the homogeneous grouping of like students is actually a detriment to struggling students. Overall, streaming students has a negative impact from the perspective of what it means to do school well, and the resultant impact on self-esteem and social hierarchies.
Chapter 5
Dividing Student Bodies and Lives

Introduction

A lot of my own interest in this project centers on the ways that streaming students in high school separates them, and on the impact that this separation has on students. To begin, I was curious about how conscious students are (or are not) of the separation, and how it influences their activities, interactions, and the ways they feel about themselves. Although the course pathways in Ontario are not as entirely and rigidly separated as they previously were (in 1999, the province officially eliminated streaming, so that students no longer have to choose one specific set of courses), even the demographic of open classes can end up being heavily influenced by the pathway structure. This chapter explores the effects of separating students by their pathway choices, and the ways that their friendships and relationships are shaped by the streams in the school. I also discuss the labels and preconceptions that emerge from structuring students’ lives this way, and how students react to these biases.

Structuring and Separating: “There are lots of people that I see walking around the school that I know are in my grade, but I’ve never had a class with them”

Alyssa said that she really liked her physical education class because it included not only the students from her Scholar pathway, but students from other pathways whom she did not know as well. Upon deeper reflection, she realized that a lot of her peers were common to her Scholar classes. She said,

Actually a lot of my gym class was people that I had had in other classes but there were a few that I hadn’t met before…because with Scholar, oftentimes what happens too is because a lot of your courses are together a lot of your other courses, especially in grade nine, end up being together because of the timetable. Because there’s only so many other courses and spots that those are offered so you end up getting put together anyways even
though it might be open or for everybody. So a lot of my gym class I think was Scholar or people I’d had in my other courses.

Zoe described this in great detail when she reflected on her experience of transitioning into high school in grade nine:

I had three French immersion classes and art, so it was a very small group of people. I barely met anybody new, because I had two of my friends, my good friends from grade eight, in my art class, so I sat with them, I talked with them, and then all of my immersion classes I met only immersion kids, they were the same group of people in every single class. So ok, this is the stupidest word for this, but I didn’t meet *any* popular people, or anything like that, I didn’t meet any of those cliques. So I was kind of a nobody, I guess you could say, just for want of a better word. And then so I just went through my classes, I had friends and I had a few new acquaintances in volleyball, but other than that it was the same basically, it was the same grade eight to high school except for time. And then I went to semester two and I had no French immersion classes, I met *everybody*, I met so many new people, I only had two of my friends in each classes, not even, but I had people from my volleyball team. So that made it easier, being on sports that went on both semesters. But I met so many people. And now I feel like I know almost everybody in my grade because I’ve been in classes with them. Or, I’ve met almost everybody in my grade in *academic* classes. Because I’ve been in classes with them. And then I’ve met lots of art kids, cause I take lots of art classes. So recently I’ve had the same group of people in classes, like in my art class and photography, And SHSM, it’s all kinda the same people. But in grade nine and ten, like end of grade nine and all of grade ten, so many new people, so many new different things because I didn’t have all French immersion together.

Zoe’s recollection reminded me that students are also divided along subject lines, another cohort that, while seemingly innocuous, can have deeper implications. I realized during the interview process that I could have substituted students in the French Immersion program for the students I interviewed from the Scholar program, as French Immersion functions as its own specialized program separating students along lines of school program structuring. Smaller et al. observed that programs like French Immersion “served as unofficial, but significant forms of
streaming within school boards…as with the “gifted” classes, there were a number of concerns raised about the movement of resources away from the regular classes to the benefit of the special immersion classes” (Curtis, Livingstone, & Smaller, 1992, p. 68). While it is a different component than streaming, specialized programming has its own influences and is another way that institutions manage student bodies and in turn, student lives.

Students had differing opinions about classes that integrated applied, academic, and Scholar students. Chantelle said that she really liked those classes, because “you get to meet other people, not just one group and then you stay with that one group all throughout high school, but you get to meet other people that you wouldn’t normally meet.” Although she enjoyed her time with her Scholar program peers, she also said that the open classes were “more happy, I don’t know if that was because of what course it was, but it was … fun-er than usual and could be just because it’s art and phys ed, but it could be because everyone’s all together, almost like a community.” I found Chantelle’s use of the word “community” both inspiring and reassuring, and reminded of Hyland’s suggestions for detracking based on its ability to cultivate democratic education and “create opportunities for students to interact across difference” (Hyland, 2006, p. 69). However, Adam felt differently as having classes only with his Scholar program peers optimized his learning opportunities. He said, “if I’m doing group projects or something like that, they’ll be trying harder,” as opposed to open classes, which make group work harder. It is important to remember that in some ways, streaming students can improve learning outcomes and some students do appreciate the structures of the current system.

One of the ideas that came up repeatedly in various conversations was the idea of a hierarchy. Some students actually used this word, while others described the idea of levels and of being higher or lower. Sometimes, students had difficulty articulating what this idea actually meant, but the idea endured. Mimi said,

I do understand when people say about when you are in applied you are a little bit lower because applied people learn things in a different way than academic people do, I feel like they do kinda …I don’t know the word, high… I don’t really know. They know more what they’re doing, kind of?

Speaking as an enrichment student, Chantelle’s description was both sensitive and honest. In discussing the idea of social divides, she said “I feel like it’s almost [an]…upper-class, lower-
class, higher-lower, like, you almost get a bad feeling in your tummy like, knowing that you’re in one of the rankings, almost, of classes.” When I asked her to elaborate, she said “Ok, so, the academic people, they would...almost look down towards the applied people, and they would be like “Oh, you’re in applied, well… like, oh,” roll their eyes.” Like many of the interviewees, at the end of the interview Chantelle expressed concern about how I may have perceived her; that she may have come across as “weird” for being “so brutally honest.” It reminded me of how sensitive this subject is, how infrequently it is discussed, and how high the stakes are for relationships in adolescence. It also gestures at how badly students feel when they are complicit in a system that reproduces social hierarchies, especially when they disagree with the system itself but do not know how to disrupt it, or do not know that it can be disrupted. It is both reassuring and endlessly frustrating, as I see that students are resentful of the harmful system, but cannot or do not push for change.

Chantelle also referred to one of the deeper, harder-to-access systems that seems that have an impact on students’ pathway placements: socio-economics. A great deal of research has been done around this topic, and Curtis, Livingstone and Smaller’s (1992) text focuses on the socio-economic class implications of streaming in Ontario; additionally, much research has focused on the post-graduation effects of streaming (see Brunello & Checci, 2007; Gamoran, 1992; Hall, 2012; Malamud & Pop-Eleches, 2011). The influence of family socio-economics on high school students while they are in adolescence is especially difficult to access because ethically, it is difficult to ask students and families questions about their socio-economic situations. However, in my experience, the students in my applied and locally developed classes seem to reflect higher levels of family poverty and less wealth: they access the school’s breakfast program, do not bring lunches or bring cheap food for lunch, they wear less name-brand clothing, cannot afford to participate in school extracurriculars that require fees, they do not have access to computers or internet in the home, etc. Chantelle’s insight is thus particularly powerful, and touching. She said,

I do feel like a lower class, almost, in my Scholar class. Because lots of them come from higher economic…status, and I was, me and my mom were on welfare for awhile, and all of the class discussions everyone would always be like, oh welfare is so bad, we need to take it away and I was the only one like, speaking up for myself.
**Jenna:** Oh, that’s interesting. So, how did that impact your experience then of being from a different socio economic class than your peers?

**Chantelle:** Um, it was, a little hard but… yeah.

**Jenna:** Hard because of the conversations you would have with them?

**Chantelle:** Yeah. Like, the conversations in class and stuff.

**Jenna:** So you feel like overall most of the Scholar kids come from a similar economic background in terms of their economic status.

**Chantelle:** Yeah.

**Jenna:** That must have been really difficult…

**Chantelle:** Yeah! *(Laughs)*

**Jenna:** It’s tough to be different. And when you said you felt like you came from a lower class, you mean like socio-economically speaking, we’re talking about wealth.

**Chantelle:** Yeah.

Chantelle’s observations about her peers’ socio-economic status reflect data about immersion programmes (another form of specialized, distinguished programming) which “are inhabited mainly by students from middle and upper-middle-class homes” *(Curtis, Livingstone, & Smaller, 1992, p. 68)*. Thus, students who already benefit from their families’ socio-economic status – and the associated protective factors and benefits, like cultural capital – also profit from education in the most elite programming at the school. Chantelle’s perspective is an argument for the establishment of classrooms that cultivate compassion and empathy, as it seems that Chantelle’s socio-economic differences were enough to destabilize the close-knit, automatic friendships that a lot of her Scholar program peers noted. It is also a challenge to educators to consider the ways that enrichment and specialized programs may emphasize and widen the already-existent class gap between not only our students, but between the families and individuals that compose our communities.
Jeremy also talked about the idea of students and the experience of status. He asserted that streaming creates social divides, explaining:

Definitely because, just walking around school you can see the different cliques. In elementary school watching high school movies I was like, “It can’t be like that, kids like kids, why do we have to be divided so much?” And when you see a kid that’s… I guess it brings up insecurities and since we’re high school students we already have enough of those. When an applied student sees an academic student talking to another academic student I don’t know if they’re gonna jump in and be like “Hey guys what’s up?” cause they’re gonna feel lesser for some reason. That’s just my opinion […] but I can see other kids feeling that way.

**Jenna:** Lesser… we’re talking about status, right? What’s that status based on? Lesser intelligence…?

**Jeremy:** They’re gonna feel like they’re gonna be looked down on because the two academic kids are gonna be like yeah we’re going to university, what are you gonna do? And like, noses down at them.

Chantelle agreed that other students may see Scholar students that way, but suggested it is inaccurate. Chantelle said “They think we are… nerds, a little bit [and] they say that we think of ourselves higher than others but personally I don’t believe that.” When I asked for clarification about what “higher” meant, again, the conversation returned to the question of intelligence. Chantelle said, “like, smarter. But me personally, I’m not a very academic person, so I’m like what Scholar doesn’t represent sort of to the other people, but I’m still in Scholar so, I’m not sure?”

Andrew, an applied student, commented on the same idea of levels and hierarchy when I asked whether he enjoys the open classes that include all applied, academic, and enrichment students (i.e. grade ten Civics). He said, “They’re okay, but on those occasions the Scholar people or the academic they think they can be better than the applied so they try to make them seem like they’re smarter than us, so it kinda… belittles us in a way.” When I asked how the academic and Scholar students make themselves seem better, he explained, “They use bigger words. They go into amazing detail about what they say. What else – they just – they just do their
best to show that they’re better, the more dominant people.” The use of the word “dominant” surprised me; not only is Andrew aware of a hierarchy, he is also conscious that this hierarchy is associated with power relations. Once again, this reflects major theories of social reproduction, where “the high school system streams people in keeping with their parents’ class position and occupation” (Curtis, Livingstone & Smaller, 1992, p. 12-13). When I asked if these more academically savvy students do in fact dominate the classrooms in these instances, Andrew said, “Yes and no. if you’re a smart person but you’re also really kind, you’re not gonna really do that. But if you’re the smart arrogant guy you’re gonna be like I run this classroom, cause I’m so smart.” This insight reminded me of how important it is to create opportunities for all students in the classroom; to pause, to give enough processing time for all students, and to create lessons that are not Socratic, teacher-centric, and call-and-response oriented. Vanessa echoed Andrew’s concerns about open classes. I asked whether she enjoys open classes, and she repeated “No” three times before explaining her thoughts. She said,

I don’t know, they feel like they can do things better than me. My native arts class I had last year, there was Scholar kids and other kids, they’re like, “Oh I know how to do dream catchers, I’ve read about it.” I’m like, “Okay, like that has nothing to do with like, book reading, it’s like hands on, like some people are better at it.” I feel like it’s a competition all the time, same with gym it’s a competition all the time and it’s ridiculous, I can’t deal with it.

Jenna: So, what makes it a competition?

Vanessa: The fact that they have to strive to be better than people. All the time.

Jenna: So how do you know that they’re trying to be better than you?

Vanessa: They’re always trying to be like, they’re always offering up help and stuff and when they do that afterwards they have their nose in the air. I just hate [it].

Vanessa sounded exhausted in her description of the daily tension and the fight to keep up. While some students certainly may be attempting to out-perform their peers, that cannot be the case in every classroom, all of the time. It makes me wonder about what we can do to help our classrooms to be less competitive, and to be environments that encourage not competition,
but collaboration. To cultivate communities where students want to support each other not for acknowledgement – because some students unquestionably help their peers in hope of recognition – but because helping others contributes to positive, healthy communities and individuals, Miller (2010) describes this holistic approach to education and recounts Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s belief that humans are part of an interconnected whole. Each person owes a debt to others for survival and for the existence of society and should be aware that an injustice done to one person or group of people is an injustice to all human beings. King (1967) wrote: ‘In a sense all life is interrelated. The agony of the poor impoverishes the rich; the betterment of the poor enriches the rich. We are inevitably our brother’s keeper because we are our brother’s brother. What affects one directly affects all indirectly.’ (p. 181)

This approach to relationships is a counterpoint to the current characterization of school as a highly competitive race to the top.

Danny had a shrewd take on the idea of hierarchy and supremacy. Early in the interview, he had mentioned the idea of stigma. When I asked about it, his comments revealed a compassionate awareness of the ways that streaming can negatively impact his peers; a compassion that, admittedly, is reassuring in an era focused on outcomes, performance incentives, and external reporting.

**Danny:** I think that a lot of people are prejudiced, but, well, I think that a good percentage of people are prejudiced, not a lot of people, because they haven’t really been able to experience a conversation with these individuals from the other pathways and they haven’t been able to really see what these individuals and understand why they took this pathway and so they think that they are superior to these people just because they’re taking a different stream of classes.

**Jenna:** So it maybe doesn’t create social divides but it has an effect anyway?

**Danny:** Yeah but I think that’s mostly because of xenophobic people, not because of pathways.
Jenna: Ok so, what are they afraid of… we’re talking about xenophobia, like the fear of people who are different from you? So what are they afraid of?

Danny: Well I guess, I know personally before I socialized with people from the other pathways, I was kind of afraid of conversing with these people and feeling like they didn’t have anything to offer to the conversation so I’d be kind of awkward with them the entire time. That’s not fair though, to be honest.

Jenna: So that fear is that you don’t have anything in common.

Danny: Yeah.

Jenna: You mentioned levels – above or below?

Danny: Yeah, some people perceive individuals in other streams as above or below you, and that’s what I was talking about when I mentioned levels.

Jenna: Ok so when we’re talking above or below, we’re talking about a social hierarchy kind of thing.

Danny: Yeah, kind of. Also, it kinda means they perceive these individuals to be dumber than them.

Jenna: Ok, so there’s a combination of social but also intellect?

Danny: Yeah.

Although the Scholar program students seem to be at the top of the social ladder as the students describe it, Jeremy disrupted that notion and highlighted how deceiving appearances can be.

Jenna: Ok, how does it feel to be in the academic pathway, and I guess you can speak to two of these, and how does it feel to be in the enrichment pathway?

Jeremy: How’s it feel to be in the Scholar pathway… I felt actually like an outsider kind of, because the Scholar program is so different from the rest of the school, I can spot Scholar kids, when I see grade nines and tens, I’ll see the way they’re talking. It’s pretty
sad that I can make a judgment based on physical observation, but it’s pretty easy to tell, when someone’s a Scholar kid, with their hand movements, and they’re talking, and how friendly they are. I just completely forgot what the question was about.

**Jenna:** How does it feel to be in the academic pathway, and how does it feel to be in the Scholar pathway?

**Jeremy:** How’s it feel to be in the Scholar. Oh yeah, I felt like an outsider. And uh, not in a bad way, just, I felt so much different from the other kids, that are walking around and talking to the other. I felt like I had to stick with Scholar kids. And a lot of the Scholar kids that I went to, enrichment was a whole bunch of Brantford schools going to one school, one day a week, so I met a lot of kids from different schools, and a lot of those kids came to CCI, so I wasn’t too alone, four [of my elementary classmates] came to CCI but whatever, 30 kids from my enrichment class came to CCI. So I just felt like I had to stick with my enrichment friends slash Scholar friends, so I didn’t really open up to applied students.

As Jeremy noted, the pathways also separate students socially. While some students stated that the pathways did not have a big impact on the friendships and relationships in the school, others disagreed. Similar to other students, Zoe described how her relationships are influenced by the pathway she belongs to. She said she had a lot of friends in the enriched program, and also, “I’m in French so I have friends in French immersion, and then I have friends in academic, cause most of my classes are academic. And then, I don’t know if any of my friends are in applied, well now it’s not applied [because we are in grade eleven].” Although Zoe did not feel that her friendships were dictated by her class pathway, she did go on to say,

But there are lots of people that I see walking around the school that I know are in my grade, but I’ve never had a class with them. So I never talk to them. So I’m guessing they’re either, our paths have just never crossed or they are always in applied classes.

**Jenna:** That’s probably a good guess, because if you’re in grade eleven…

**Zoe:** My brother said when he was at his graduation, that he counted about 20 kids he’d never seen in his life walk across that stage. And he was like oh, ok.
Jenna: That’s crazy!

Zoe: It’s not that you don’t want to talk to them, or you don’t… that you want to ignore them, it’s just you’ve never seen them. It’s just, completely different schedules, or activities outside of school, and stuff like that.

Even though students are open-minded about their interactions, the school’s choice to structure them academically has implications for social relationships as well. The impact that streaming has on friendships and relationships between students at school was one of the major topics that students discussed during their interviews; unsurprising, as relationships are of critical importance during adolescence.

Friendships and Relationships: “All the dance kids stay together, all the Scholar kids stick together”

While some students suggested that friend groups are not dictated by class pathway, many acknowledged that the streams do influence who they socialize with, even if their choices are not deliberately intended to exclude anyone. Adam said,

I don’t think it creates divides but almost puts them in, it doesn’t force them; it does divide them, but it doesn’t force it. Because they’re put into classes with each other. They’re going to be more friendly towards each other than than they would be with other people like Scholar because they’re not with them.

Some students tried to evade this issue, seeming as though they did not want their answers to be taken as snobbish or mean. Alyssa said,

Do I have friends in different pathways? I definitely think that my friend groups have been determined a lot by what classes I’ve chosen because obviously you’re with those people more. Like I said I have more friends in the Scholar classes because we’re constantly together especially in grade nine and ten, where most of your high school friends are determined in those grades. But I have some friends in like other pathways or people that I’ve met in other pathways because of like, extracurricular where it draws all sorts of people in.
Vanessa also shared this viewpoint, telling me that she had made most of her friends in her classes.

**Jenna:** So if you’re not having classes with the Scholar kids or the academic class, you’re not going to meet them so you won’t become friends with them?

**Vanessa:** Not saying that, I could be friends with them it’s just I haven’t… I don’t know another way to approach them, if I wasn’t in a class.

**Jenna:** Right. So, kinda building on that idea, do you think that having streams creates social divides between students?

**Vanessa:** Yep.

**Jenna:** Can you explain that?

**Vanessa:** Like, streams as in …

**Jenna:** Applied and academic and Scholar.

**Vanessa:** It's cause, it’s difficult. Because I wouldn’t just go up to a random person that I have never met before, I’ve never been in a class, don’t even know their name, I wouldn’t just go up to them and try to communicate with them and be their friend, unless it was over social media or something like that, but over social media I wouldn’t know what class they were in.

**Jenna:** So you think it creates social divisions because you don’t have any exposure to them at all?

**Vanessa:** Yep.

**Jenna:** Does it influence the cliques at school?

**Vanessa:** Yeah. All the dance kids stay together, all the Scholar kids stick together, you know, sports people stick together.
**Jenna:** Yeah. And does that have an impact on the environment or the school atmosphere here?

**Vanessa:** No. I don’t think it does.

Although Vanessa said that she did not feel streaming influenced our school environment, I wondered how much her answer was a reflection of our different ways of perceiving the school and the concept of environment. When I walk the halls, I see students separated along the same lines as the streamed classes I teach, and I see the gaps between them and think about the ways this impacts the social environment at our school. Vanessa, though, has a different perception of this environment from her different vantage point; perhaps if she does not see outright tension, she does not perceive it as a disruption.

Several students commented on the idea that it was difficult to meet people outside of class, so they had started and maintained friendships with classmates, who were invariably in the same stream as they were. An interesting motif that emerged was the cafeteria; many students, in commenting about the cliques and social makeup of the school, referred to the cafeteria in their descriptions. When I asked Alyssa whether having streams creates social divides between students, and if it then influences the cliques, she replied,

Um, yeah I think so. Even in the cafeteria in grade nine there was the table of kids that were in the Scholar class and they often sat at the same table. Not always as well because extracurriculars can bring people together from all different streams. So, the people who do sports together they’ll sometimes sit at the same table too. It doesn’t completely determine but there’s definitely an influence.

When I asked Mimi the same question, she also referred to the cafeteria.

Ohhh, yeah. I do. There are some people, in the cafeteria, that just chill and they’re all in the same classes, and they think they’re so cool and I’m just like “Kay, cool, you’re in an academic class, who cares?” (laughs) Sit down, who cares. I’m here to learn, I don’t care if I have friends or not at school, I’m only here for a certain amount of time, and then I’m gone! I don’t care.
The focus on the cafeteria as a space of division raises concerns about whether this is a space that schools should take more seriously, and whether schools should do more with this space or leave some spaces unstructured (see Tatum, 2003). Ramiah, Schmid, Hewstone and Floe (2014) recommend that when trying to encourage intergroup socializing, “thoughtful planning must ensure that appropriate social structures are in place to harness the full potential of desegregation” (p. 120). Teens certainly spend enough of their time in structured activities already – between school, sports practices, extracurriculars, homework, etc. – but the frequency with which students referred to this space as one of tension and conflict suggests that perhaps more can be done to cultivate the cafeteria as a place for positive, pro-social interaction across social classes and cliques.

Like Mimi, Zoe commented on the cafeteria in her discussion of cliques.

I feel like lots of cliques are really integrated, it’s not like movies. It’s not like some high schools that might be like that. Lots of people move from group to group. There is definitely certain groups that hang out. And you normally see it at lunch. All of the grade eleven girls, that now that I look at it, that all are academic, now that I look at it, or think about it, it’s kinda separated into two, and then this half is Scholarish and the people they kinda knew, and then sports-ish. On the other side, people who have met on teams or… yeah. Met on teams. But we know people on the, we know them, because they’re in our classes, and they’re the same age, and they’re nice, all that type of things. But then I would hang out with a bunch of people from here, but not some of them. I know them, and I talk to them at lunch, but I’d never hang out with them after school. And there’s people over here that I know and I hang out with, but some of them I never will. It’s just kinda funny how things work out.

Danny also stated that the streams create social divides, only because students from the different pathways do not get to know each other

‘Cause when you have academic classes you are with the same group of people and so when you spend less time with someone it’s only fair that you don’t know them as well so there’s going to be a divide between these individuals, but I think that it isn’t a major effect, it’s just what happens. There aren’t major cliques and I’ve seen a lot of academic and applied students be friends.
It was heartening to hear students discuss the social divisions in this way. Although they can see the divides as they exist, my overall impression was that students do not inherently dislike each other, or have intent to hurt other students. It does put the onus back on the educators who are complicit in this system, however, and it makes these divisions even more insidious. Students are divided in such a way that they can recognize the divisions, but find it hard to resist or overcome them; in fact, they do not even see a need for them to be overcome or challenged. Chantelle said that she believes students are divided, but students still want to get to know each other. She gave an interesting insight when she suggested that

Lots of academic people I know stick with just academic, but applied people I know don’t. So I think it’s one-sided almost.

Jenna: Ok, so the academic kids choose to stick together and then the applied kids mix around a little more?

Chantelle: Yeah.

Jenna: And how does Scholar fit into that equation?

Chantelle: Scholar kids, lots of them stick together.

Jenna: And how come? You talked a bit about how you really get to know Scholar very well and you really don’t get to know other people. Is that because of that?

Chantelle: I think so, just because they’ve been almost secluded to that one group and like, always been with that group the whole high school. It’s good and bad, all at the same time!

Jenna: And does that have an impact on the school atmosphere here? The fact that we’ve got those divided groups?

Chantelle: I don’t think so… we still all have school spirit.

Zoe also described, in great detail, the ways that students’ friendships form across the lines drawn by course pathways. She said “There are kids I know that I’ve never had a class with. But I’m still friends with them because they hang out with the same people I hang out
with.” When I asked whether the pathways create divisions between students, her answer was interesting and added to the complexity of the ways that students are grouped and organized, if not divided, in schools. Zoe said,

I don’t know about social divides, maybe… I don’t think the streams do it, I think maybe what you choose to do, what type of student you are- that might be a stream, I don’t know. But like if you’re an art student, you take lots of art classes, if you’re a science student, you take science and then you meet people that are in the sciences, or stuff geared towards that, I think that’s or, like phys ed… I think that would divide it more than a stream would. As I said, I have no idea if my friends are in applied, cause that really wouldn’t matter. Cause if I already knew them, or met them through someone else. I feel like it might, that could divide them, not as much as what area you’re going into.

Zoe’s suggestion pointed out the influence of subject areas and influence, as well, another way that students are organized and grouped in schools. We also discussed cliques, and Zoe contended that pathways do not influence school cliques, unless

Maybe if you’ve always just had applied classes and then you’re always with the same group of students, then yes, I would say so. But if you have a math that’s applied and a science that’s applied and then you’re with everybody else, or you have one academic and mostly applied or stuff like that, but I feel like it’s not that big of a thing unless that’s all you’re taking. And I feel like there’s not a lot of students that take only applied. It’s just like a select few, I think. But I’m not too sure.

Zoe suggests that students may not be so separated if they did not take all of their classes in one pathway only. However, research suggests that “students can opt to mix and match applied, academic, locally developed, and open courses, but data from the Ontario Ministry of Education shows that the majority of students (62%) taking Grade 9 applied math are taking three or more applied courses. Only 10% of students take applied math and no other applied courses” (People for Education, 2013, p. 2). The representation of the current system as an alternative to tracking thus seems nominal, and we must therefore consider that the effects associated with a tracked system are also present in contemporary Ontario schools.
Mimi also concurred with this assessment about the number of applied students at the school, saying, “I feel like personally a lot of people are in academic classes, and then there’s just some people who are in applied. That’s what I feel like. A lot of the school do academic and I’m just here in applied doing applied.” This observation leads me to wonder whether it is true, or whether this perception is the result of the dominant, Scholar and academic classes receiving more attention and more publicity than the applied students. Further, I wonder how it feels to be the statistically smaller group when these students already feel marginalized and less capable; does it exaggerate their feelings of incompetence? Does it feel like everyone else somehow figures out how to be successful, while they trail behind and cannot quite get it right?

Unsurprisingly, students had a lot to say about the topic of cliques. Jeremy suggested that friend groups are influenced by course pathways. Danny said that he did not see an influence on cliques from the pathways, because the year below me in the grade 10s, I see like the French immersion girls as the main people… the popular people — with quotation marks around that, but they’re the popular people for the entire school, they’re not the popular people in French just French immersion. So I don’t understand how that would be a specific thing that just applies to that pathway.

Like Zoe, Danny saw groupings occurring not only around pathways but also around subject areas or specialized programs. While this is also a way that schools group students, it is also natural to assume that students would befriend other students who have similar interests.

There was also complex and interesting conversation around the influence that course pathways have on extracurricular activities at school. Students were divided about whether they believed that pathways affect extracurriculars, and some deepened the conversation, suggesting that certain sports may be more affected than others. Zoe suggested that “people who are in applied either don’t do anything outside of school, or they do their one thing, or their two things.” She suggested that on the rugby team, “there’s so many different types of people, it’s really strange. And then Students’ Council it’s all mostly Scholar type of kids, like go-getter type of kids. And yearbook it’s lots of in between artsy kids and also who are involved in stuff.” Mimi initially disagreed, saying “No. No no no. I don’t think so. ‘Cause I’m in applied, but I’m also in ...the SHSM program, and there’s people in the SHSM program who are in academic, and
they’re doing the same work I’m doing.” She also commented about the players on the rugby team, however, and how many of them were academic students. When I drew her attention to this, her answer changed.

**Jenna:** So, your voice changed, your tone changed when you talked about the rugby players being all academic or mostly academic. Do you think that’s something that is team by team?

**Mimi:** I don’t know. I’m just speaking for the rugby girls. I don’t think that... Not every group is like that, but I’m just saying some of the rugby girls are academic. I don’t really know. I feel like some of the applied are...not really known. There are some people I know who are in applied that do hang out with a lot of academic people, but they don’t, they don’t do sports or anything. I don’t know. Just most of the girls I know that play rugby and stuff are academic. I don’t know, that’s just the way I think of it. Thinking of the people on teams and stuff cause usually, for games and activities and stuff the same people make it on the team all the time, like for volleyball, I was gonna try out but the same people make it on all the time so I’m like, I’m not trying out. But me thinking about it now, the people who are usually on the teams are like, academic.

**Jenna:** So is that a deterrent for you at all? Does it make you not wanna go and try out or is it more about athletic ability?

**Mimi:** More about athletic ability. If I was good at rugby, I’d totally try out but… I tried out once, but I don’t know. I might try it again just for fun, but I know I won’t make it on.

Jeremy suggested that pathway designation influences extracurricular involvement.

**Jeremy:** Well, um I’m pretty sure… a lot of Scholar kids aren’t really in sports. And I don’t know if it’s sexist or not but there’s a bigger female percentage in Scholar, there’s like four boys now, next year compared to like the thirty girls. Not saying girls don’t do sports but I’m pretty sure a lot of them are more into like into, debate club not actual football or anything like that. And I think it’s cause the amount of homework that it takes to succeed in that class, it takes up a lot of your time and a lot of kids also have part-time
jobs and things like that. So to add basketball to that, it would probably be too much for a kid our age to handle. Some kids could handle it but…

Although Scholar students seem to consistently appear at the top of the social status ladder, Jeremy’s comment suggested that they are not all-around all star students, again reinforcing the influence that academic success can have on students’ social standing.

The influence that pathways have on structuring students’ social lives and their senses of self-esteem was particularly resonant when Chantelle and I discussed whether she had ever considered moving to a different pathway, especially because she expressed more than once that she felt different from her Scholar peers, and was not as academically successful or motivated as her classmates. Chantelle had mentioned that her mom put a lot of pressure on her to stay in the Scholar program. When I asked some deeper questions, however, a more complex and perturbing answer emerged. Chantelle laughed and said that her mom prevents her from changing, and that she also knows she “should” stay in the program because it looks good on a resume. I asked if there was anything else to this idea that she “should” stay, and her answer surprised me in its candidness.

**Chantelle:** The should is coming from my peers a little bit. Cause, if I dropped out they’d, all the Scholar people would be like “Ohh, you dropped out. Now you’re lower, almost, again.”

**Jenna:** The lower- are we talking lower-class socially, or the economic thing?

**Chantelle:** Socially.

**Jenna:** You are maintaining a certain social status cause you’re in Scholar, but if you dropped out you feel like you’d lose a certain social status?

**Chantelle:** Yeah.

**Jenna:** Do you think it would affect your friendships with the people in Scholar?

**Chantelle:** Um, yeah.

**Jenna:** How might it affect it?
**Chantelle**: We wouldn’t see each other for one, a lot. And they would just still wanna stick with their Scholar people, so…

**Jenna**: Right, cause you said Scholar people stick together, socially.

**Chantelle**: Yep.

This discussion ran somewhat as a counterpoint to the students’ claims that their social lives and friendships had been effected by streaming, but that it was not a choice they had made. Chantelle was choosing not to change pathways because of the very real threat that she may lose a significant number of friends, and be exposed to an entirely new and unfamiliar peer group. This, coupled with the academic risk (discussed later in this section) that students incur by switching pathways, to some degree speaks sadly to why so few students choose to change their pathways at any point during high school.

The language around changing pathways is itself prejudiced. A common expression is to phrase these pathways changes as moving “up” to academic courses or moving “down” from Scholar to academic, or from academic to applied. The implication is, of course, that to move down is to move to an easier pathway. For example, Zoe said she did not change pathways because

If I’d lost the drive to be in the academic program, that would have taken something really severe or drastic to make that change. So because nothing like that happened, there’s no reason should I have to go down [to that] program. Or that pathway.

Danny also referred to this label when I asked for clarification around what he deemed as unfair treatment among the students, based on their pathway.

**Jenna**: And do you see unequal treatment right now?

**Danny**: Well, with the students yeah. I see the stigma that I already talked about, and I see that people talk down about being in applied.

**Jenna**: Right, that thing like “I’m going to move down to the applied.”

**Danny**: Yes.
The students’ discussions about the way that pathways influence their lives gives insight to the ways that streaming shapes and moulds them, not only in the classroom and in their post-secondary decisions, but also in the ways that they form relationships, the activities they participate in outside of class, and the inherent risks that they see in connection to their academic and non-academic decisions. Khmelkov and Hallinan (1999) explored the effects of school structuring on intergroup relations, looking at interracial contact and segregated/desegregated schools. They cite a study by Kubitschek and Hallinan (1999) that found high school students in the same track were in more frequent, regular contact “and were more likely to choose one another as friends. Same-track placement also increased similarity between students over time, which in turn increased the probability of choosing friends within the same track” (in Khmelkov and Hallinan, 1999, p. 634). Not only are students not meeting people from the other pathways, they are sharing experiences with their same-track peers which makes them more alike and differentiates them from same-age peers in different tracks. Khmelkov and Hallinan also discuss the idea of status and of conferring status onto another student. Using theories of personal attraction, they explain how students with a higher status are more attractive, because the person of lesser status can experience a “halo effect” that gives them some social mobility of their own.

Conversely, “it can also motivate members of the dominant group who are status conscious to avoid relations with minority group members for fear that they might lose prestige in the eyes of their similar-status peers” (Khmelkov and Hallinan, 1999, p. 631). This could explain Chantelle’s concerns about moving from the Scholar to the academic pathway, where her peers may begin to minimize or end their friendships with her out of a fear that they may lose prestige. While adults may tend to demean and misunderstand the importance that teens give to their social lives, this insight reveals that the pressure and consequences of social decisions are far from superficial, and may in fact impact not only students’ lives during high school, but the life pathways that will have major implications post-graduation. Many of these apprehensions about students from the other pathways seemed, in the interviews, to arise from the enduring stereotypes about students in the different pathways.
Assumptions and Presumptions: “If I was writing this thesis myself I would talk about respect”

At the same time as I was working on this research project, a colleague and I were running an experimental project with our classes. My colleague was teaching a grade ten academic English class during the same period as my grade ten applied English, and we decided to have our classes work together, intending for us to collaborate on the final project of the semester. Our desire to integrate the classes was twofold: we wanted to show both our students and our colleagues that students in the two pathways were capable of similar work, and socially, we wanted to bring them together to show them that they are not as different from each other as they often think they are. I expected some apprehension, but was not prepared for the resistance I got from my students. They erupted into anger on the first day we were to meet (in our school library, a neutral space), angrily telling me that the other class would not like them, that the other class was full of snobs, that they were spoiled, and that, ultimately, they were nothing alike. Even after a successful cooperative activity, my students returned to our classroom irritated and resentful, telling me that I should not have forced them to do that and that it was unfair and unkind of me to make them work together. My explanations of why we had pursued the integration did nothing to dissuade their ire.

Accordingly, some of the questions I asked in the interviews attempted to determine the ways that students see each other, and whether they were aware of any of the prevailing stereotypes. Alyssa suggested that a popular stereotype about students in the enriched program indicates that they are overachievers, although she countered that, saying “that’s not always true, there’s all types of people in the program. I guess that people would say we… enjoy school and learning.” Danny also suggested in his interview that the impression that smart students are only in academic and enrichment is incorrect. He said, “I don’t think that’s accurate because I know a lot of smart people who take college courses, or I guess, applied courses, because they don’t necessarily need to go to university for what they wanna do. I think there is a stigma that comes with individuals in college or applied courses and I don’t really think it’s really fair to them.” That was actually a thought he returned to, in the last moments of his interview. He said,
I wanna come back to teachers and applied/academic/Scholar… I feel like there should be an emphasis on the stigma that people have about applied students and I think that we should work as one, as a community, to deal with this. And we should make everyone feel included even if they make bad choices and they do drugs, even if they make bad choices and they are failing, I think we should band together and make everyone feel good and feel respected, and that’s how we’re going to deal with our issues instead of putting down other people and being like this is worse, so you should get better.

**Jenna:** That’s interesting, I very much agree with your point. Is there anything you wanted to add that I didn’t touch on? Any parting thoughts?

**Danny:** I think that this interview, mostly is, well I guess, if I was writing this thesis myself I would talk about respect and I’d talk about moral standing, and what it means to be cared for and be cared about. Because that’s what this is about.

Unbeknownst to him, Danny had hit on one of the central issues that drives my work. Students spend many, many hours of their formative years in school; they need to feel respected, valued, and cared for. It became clear throughout the interviews that high school is a place with a clear structure of what is valued and what is not; furthermore, this value structure plays out not only in classrooms, on tests and report cards, but in the social relationships and social spaces that students occupy within the school (for example, the cafeteria, which remains an important and central social space for students).

Presumptions about the students themselves seemed to originate from stereotypes – true or untrue – about the pathways, and what kind of learning they entail, where they lead, etc. Zoe said,

I never really knew about academic and applied, even though my mom’s a teacher, I just kinda figured… you take the better option, if you think you can handle it. And, I always thought university for me, was better. Cause… I don’t even know. College I always thought was more of like a hands-on thing, and then you go into that stream and then it’s just… (deep breath) this isn’t right, but I always kinda thought it was like a step down from university, it’s not as big of a deal if you go to college than university. Now I know it’s like the same thing, you’re going to get an education no matter what. It’s just a
different way of learning. But I always thought oh, it’s less, so I’ll just go to the better one.

**Jenna:** Well there is the PC thing right? Where we make that effort to say, they’re the same, they’re the same. But I think culturally there’s that pressure – we’re gonna say it’s the same, but...

**Zoe:** Go to university!

**Jenna:** I hear parents say oh yeah, they’re the same, they’re the same, but we want him to go to university.

I was grateful to Zoe for her bravery in the candour she used to speak about expectations that both students and parents have for post-secondary pathways. Even before she inhaled deeply and said what she clearly felt was a hurtful and biased statement about the value of university versus college, she stated that students take the “better option” if they can “handle it.” At the heart of these beliefs is still the ranking of one option as superior, and the characterization of those in the applied or workplace pathways as unable to handle the demands of academic courses. It is understandable, then, that students have internalized those classifications, and heartbreaking to think about how this label must weigh on them day in and day out over four or more years of secondary education.

Two of the biggest outliers from the interviews were the air of mystery that seems to shroud the Scholar program, and an overall sense that students are uninformed about some of the information regarding pathways in high school. Allowing the enrichment program to remain mysterious and enigmatic maintains a troubling sense of elitism. These ambiguities are important gaps of knowledge, as they translate – especially general pathway knowledge – into decisions that shape the agency of students both during and after high school. These decisions affect students’ professions, their earning potential, their relationships, the ways they see themselves, and even how they engage with the world. The essentiality of these decisions cannot be overstated.
Elitism and Enigma: “Once you do the class you get it”

The Scholar Program is one of the special programs that the school is noted for; it is unique in the board, as the only school offering this program and the specialized learning that accompanies it. It is marketed as an enrichment program, with elements of both leadership, presentations, and teamwork. As previously noted, students seem to view this program as a selection of the most high-achieving performers in the school; students who are bound for post-secondary success and advancement. The information sheet on the CCI website includes the following:

The Scholar Program provides students with the opportunity to work with other highly motivated, academically-minded students. The program provides students with the opportunity to prepare for the intensity of university studies in any discipline. Students will develop confidence in leadership, presentation, and teamwork skills through the unique collaborative focus of the program. Students have the chance to take a first-year university course while still attending high school. Upon graduation, Scholar program participants earn a certificate, endorsed by [the] University, recognizing the student’s involvement in the program. In order to develop leadership, presentation and teamwork skills, students in the Scholar program have the opportunity to work together in a variety of courses throughout high school. Designated “Scholar” courses feature integration among the subject areas as a key component of the program philosophy.

Although all of my interviewees were aware of the Scholar program and seemed to accept these students as the top of the imaginary academic ladder, a great deal of mystery surrounded what the Scholar program actually stood for or focused on, even for the students from the program. Chantelle described how when she entered high school,

for the Scholar class specifically I had no idea what it was about, [teachers] were like, “Oh it’s a leadership program, oh you’re gonna have fun,” and I was like, Okay, I’m not sure what that really is. But once you do the class you get it… I wish there was a way of explaining Scholar to other people, but it’s really hard!

When I asked her to describe it, she said the classes included “Lots of presentations in front of the class and other people… as well as… group learning, getting to know others, and
also getting to know yourself within getting to know others.” Chantelle had applied for the program knowing that there was an element of distinction, but was unable to specify exactly what it entailed, even after nearly three years in the program.

Adam gave a similar answer when I asked what activities were like in the Scholar classes. He said,

Well we do a lot of group work, with... in the drama classes we had a bunch of group presentations. We didn’t really, that was a different, that was almost a drama class, we never really did that in any other, yeah we didn’t do that in other classes. Since it was drama I feel like we did more group work cause that’s a class that you do group work in. Math you don’t really do group work. And English is Scholar too […] It’s not that different, honestly, than other classes, the work. The activities aren’t very different.

Alyssa also described the types of activities they did in their Scholar classes. Typically, there are two Scholar classes per school year that are timetabled one period after the other, so that students in both classes can work together in a large group for extended activities. These periods are typically referred to as “integration.” Alyssa described one of these activities:

During an integration one time we did a very hands-on kind of lab [where] we went outside and showed a predator-prey kind of analogy. This was a science course. Nothing like that really happened as much in our academic courses. We also had a net thing that we caught like… bugs or something … which didn’t happen in our academic courses as much. But they were still the same concepts that we were learning and stuff, it wasn’t as hands on.

Although many non-Scholar students referred to the Scholar program in our interviews, it seemed to be an enigma and many students could not describe what the program meant, or how it worked. When I asked Mimi what she thought a Scholar class was like, she said, “I don’t know what really Scholar is about. (Laughs). So I’m gonna pass on that. I don’t know what Scholar’s about.”

Like Chantelle, Alyssa had a difficult time describing the Scholar program, despite being in it for three years. When I asked her whether she thought it had been a good experience, she
agreed, but struggled to define it. She said that she liked the class community that had developed as a result of always being together. She also said,

To be honest, I don’t really know, exactly, what Scholar is, still. And when people ask me what the Scholar program is, I’m still reading off the sheet that I got in grade nine, when I got in… (laughs). I do enjoy it, but I don’t see … exactly…what is different about it. But now that I’m in it and I only have a few more courses left I might as well finish it. […] But I know people as well, in the Scholar program who are all for it, 100% and could probably explain better than I could exactly what it’s about and all that it’s done for them.

Students must apply to the program, and the selection is done by a committee. On the application, students are advised that they are selected based on “strong academic ability,” “grade 8 overall average of 80% or more with no failures,” “a positive attitude & willingness to work with others,” “a high motivation to learn,” and be “self-disciplined and have good work habits.” Students may only enter the program when they begin high school, but can leave the program at any time throughout their high school careers.

Alyssa said that being accepted to the program was a positive feeling, and said,

I felt like I was a good student, and I had done well in my elementary school and yeah, … I guess it’s kind of a … confidence booster, it kind of plays to your ego a little bit, (laughs) that you’re in a specialized course like that. But it’s not definitely based on, well it’s not definitely not, but it’s not all based on grades and things…from what I was told there was a lot of things they looked at when accepting students.

While the program itself may be beneficial in many ways, it is problematic to note that students both in and out of the program cannot articulate its purpose or its selection criteria, especially when – according to the students – it seems to offer a certain amount of esteem, power, and privilege to those enrolled. While much of the research around tracking criticizes the separation and categorization of students, Kulik and Kulik’s (1992) meta-analysis suggests that “the academic benefits are clearest for those in the higher ability groups, but students in the lower groups are not harmed academically by grouping” (p. 76). They also note that different types of grouping (i.e. within-class, cross-grade, etc.) produce different effects, though “enriched and accelerated classes produce moderate-to-large positive effects” (Kulik & Kulik, 1992, p. 76).
Kulik and Kulik’s research supports the maintenance of programs like the Scholar program, at least for the benefit of higher-performing students. It is worthwhile to note, however, that in Kulik and Kulik’s (1992) conclusion, they propose that “ability grouping does not have devastating effects on student self-esteem, as Oakes (1985) has charged. Effects of grouping on self-esteem are near-zero overall” (p. 76). My conversations with students make a strong case for the opposite; separating them on the basis of ability seems to have a powerful effect on their self-esteem. The mystery around the Scholar program and its limited benefits are controversial, at the very least. The program remains an inaccessible, impenetrable, elite designation that outsiders neither understand nor can gain entry to.

Summary

This chapter explored the effects of separating students into streams, and considered the impact it has on students’ social lives and relationships. Streaming students also impacts their open classes and results in them interacting less with students from outside of their own streams. Many students referred to the hierarchy that emerges from the current streaming structure, and the ways that their social hierarchy reflects the hierarchy of streams (enriched, academic, applied, and locally developed) in the school. In particular, Chantelle discussed how streaming also reflects socio-economic status, where the wealthiest students enroll in academic and enriched classes, and those who are less affluent enroll in applied and academic. The hierarchy also evidently creates a sense of competition in school, one that the academic and enriched students always win. Additionally, students talked about how their pathways had a major impact on their friendships and relationships at school, partly due to their exposure to others and partly due to the aforementioned idea of status and social hierarchy. Finally, we discussed the stigmas and stereotypes that have developed about the different pathways and the students in them, and how destructive these can be for both interpersonal relationships and individual self-esteem.
Chapter 6
Learning in the High School Pathways

Introduction

In amongst conversations about stereotypes, separation, and stigma, were conversations that commented on the ways that students’ motivation is activated, the ways that interest affects their learning, and how they learn. In this chapter, I discuss the influence that interest can have on student engagement and achievement. I also explore the relationship between the various pathways and motivation, and how they impact each other, as well as impact achievement.

Interest: “Taking classes you like will definitely make you more successful”

I was surprised to hear how often students commented on the effect that personal interest had on their achievement and engagement not only in individual classes, but in their overall school days. Research suggests, of course, that if a student is interested in what he or she is learning, he or she is more likely to enjoy and take away from the experience (see Ainley in Christenson, Reschly & Wylie, 2012; Wigfield & Cambria, 2010). Mimi, an applied student, said that she was more easily able to focus on drama because it is something she is interested in, as opposed to law and English; she said she was able to focus more on drama courses because she likes drama more and therefore grasps it more easily. She also said that being in grade eleven was preferable to her experience in grades nine and ten, because she had more electives and “got to pick stuff that [she] wanted to do rather than stuff [she] had to do.” Danny also valued this connection. He told a story about taking a SHSM class where he felt like he was not important and did not feel that the course was beneficial for him, so his productivity in other classes went down. He was not doing as well in his other classes, because he “felt bad whenever [he] went to that SHSM class,” which affected his overall feelings about school. He acknowledged that “taking classes you like will definitely make you more successful.”

Zoe echoed this sentiment. She described how she had always been interested in the arts, which had helped her to choose classes and find a part of school to engage in deeply. She also connected this to her choice of the university pathway. Zoe said that art had always been highly appealing to her, which influenced her to think about pursuing an arts program after secondary
school. She said, “Because I know what classes I like, and I know what intrigues me, and what I like to learn in, I think that’s made it easy to decide where I’m going afterwards.” Knowing what she was interested in from a young age not only allowed her to engage more with the subject at the time, it also benefited her long-term plans. Zoe added,

I feel like yeah, the classes I picked were definitely because of my interests, and my interests were because I knew where I wanted to go. It’s what you’re good at. You keep to what you’re good at and maybe one or two challenges, but otherwise I feel like most people go towards what they’re warm, what they’ve warmed up to.

Zoe’s high level of school success and satisfaction make a strong argument for exposing students to a variety of interests and activities at a young age, so that they can find an area to “plug into.” Zoe also suggested that extracurriculars could play an important role in helping students to figure out their interests. She said, “I find if you don’t do a lot outside of school, then you don’t really have any major interests, so you don’t really know where you wanna go, unless like you’re a total math person or you’re a complete science geek or something like that.”

I have suspected, given my own experience as a teacher and coach, that extracurricular involvement reflects students’ pathway placements, in part due to the high cost of athletic fees and the cost of some sports due to required equipment (i.e. football, hockey). However, Danny said in his discussion of extracurriculars, “I think that individuals that are interested in drama have their own set of extracurriculars for them as well, and individuals who are interested in sports take gym, because that’s a pathway you can take.” He felt that students’ extracurricular activities were more reflective of the subject areas they are interested than their own school pathways. Andrew also agreed, suggesting that there is no connection between school abilities and extracurriculars, and that students can participate in the activities that appeal to them, even if they are not considered “smart.” This is fairer than what I anticipated, but it also requires a wide variety of extracurricular activities in a school, to appeal to and support all students.

Motivation: “I wish people pushed me in high school, even though I know I should be doing it myself”

Although I was also surprised at how often the topic of motivation came up, I was not at all surprised to hear that students felt their motivation often reflected how interested they were in
the subject areas or the topics they were studying. Alyssa actually commented on this, suggesting that “some of the projects sometimes for Scholar and assignments that we get are… maybe more interesting, and that might motivate us a little bit more in our classes, my classes. But I think it’s still…more personal than it is, than it has to do with your stream that you’re in.”

There was, however, a strong feeling from several students that there is a connection between pathway placement and motivation, regardless of the pathway the students were in. Interestingly, students seemed to feel that being in the Scholar or academic pathway was more motivating; several applied pathway students commented that their pathway did not motivate them. Sadly, these are probably the students who need the motivation the most; as students who – by their own description – are more likely to struggle in school, they need to be motivated to perform, especially in areas where they feel unconfident.

Chantelle affirmed the connection between being in the Scholar program and feeling a sense of drive. She said, “Yeah, it makes me feel like I should be motivated so I sort of am a little bit, I need to do good in these classes or else I can’t be in Scholar anymore.” When I asked whether there was an expectation that Scholar students do well in school, she wholeheartedly agreed. Although Alyssa felt motivation was a highly personal element, she did say that the initial paperwork they had gotten for the program stated a minimum 85% average to stay in the program. However, she suggested that there were students who did not have that average, but stayed in the program anyway. She said that it did not affect her, but it may affect other students who do not have that high average and “might not think they can maintain that, and end up dropping out because of that or because of the pressure they might feel from other students who have these high expectations for themselves and averages.” This difference between the printed rules and the lived reality may also contribute to the stereotype of Scholar students as academically superior. It also may contribute to the number of students who apply to the program, especially students who, coming into high school from grade eight, do not feel academically strong. The difference between policy and procedure thus becomes problematic, as it excludes students, at the beginning of high school, from a program that offers more prestige and opportunity, on a false premise. It also speaks to the gaps between perception and reality, because students from other pathways generally seemed to view Scholar students as academically infallible, when the reality is that they are not held to the standard that the program promotes.
Zoe’s reflections on motivation agreed with Alyssa’s suggestion, that students are also influenced by seeing their peers working hard. Zoe said, “I feel like for me, being in classes with other enthusiastic people, say it’s a French immersion classes, lots of those are also Scholar kids, I feel like being in a class with those types of people pushes me to want to be better than them, or as good as them.” Thus, the effect of academic classes is not only nominal in nature; students may also respond to their peers’ behaviour and level of motivation in class, and respond to this with their own increased motivation. Therein lies an argument for destreaming, or for integrating course pathways, as students who are less engaged may benefit from interacting and learning with their more motivated peers.

Vanessa actually referred to the Scholar program, when we discussed teachers’ expectations. She said, “say I was in Scholar and I’d have to do all of this, or else I’d get kicked out of it. I would do it, because I would want to be in there, but I can’t get kicked out of academic or applied.” When I asked whether there were no consequences for slacking off in the applied pathway, she confirmed it, explaining that the only consequence was failing the credit. This troubled me; what kind of message is that? Is it true that our applied students feel our expectations are so low that we do not expect more from them than to keep their heads just above water, just above the 50% line of pass/failure?

Vanessa discussed how in the applied pathway, her teachers have been lenient with her and it has had a detrimental impact on her drive and achievement. She explained,

If I was in academic I would feel like I would have deadlines, like a set deadline, cause all the teachers I’ve had in the past three years they’ve been really lenient with me. And they always give me extensions but sometimes I want a teacher that’s going to be like, “No, have it due this day,” so I actually do it. […] I feel like teachers don’t care. I know they care, it’s just they don’t…I keep giving them the same excuse and they keep letting me slide with it. Want a teacher that’ll be like, “Nope, due this day, have it done or you don’t get a mark for it,” and then I have to do it because I need to pass high school.

Vanessa’s description was a clear reminder of the importance of high expectations. I have encountered this tendency in my own career, and I see it in my own practice, sometimes; so many of my applied students struggle in school, and as a compassionate, caring adult who is invested in my students’ lives, it is difficult to watch them struggle, suffer, and sometimes, to
fail. However, I also know that when I set high expectations for all of my students (academic, applied, or otherwise), their achievement is better, and they often even exceed my expectations. This gives teachers both a lot of power, and a certain amount of responsibility, as we ought to encourage our students (all of them) to achieve to their greatest possible potential.

Zoe described the difference as a matter of work habits. She said, “my mom’s a teacher and I always find that when she teaches an academic class the students work harder, and I feel that in an academic class also, more stuff gets handed in, projects get done quicker, it’s not so much late stuff. Like there is always, but it’s less; less late stuff. Better work ethic, I guess?” In contrast with Vanessa’s thoughts, though, I wonder whether this work ethic begins in the student, or whether it actually begins in the expectations of the teacher.

Danny reminded me that motivation can improve student engagement. He said in his academic classes, “I’m kinda just drifting along not doing any homework at all and getting okay marks. So I don’t really feel challenged in my classes and I don’t really feel motivated to do work in my classes because I don’t really feel challenged.” Zoe also emphasized the importance of both teacher enthusiasm and teacher expectations. At one point in our interview, Zoe described a teacher who loved the subject area so much that it made Zoe want to work hard, even though it was Zoe’s least favourite subject and not something she naturally excelled at. She later said that she had difficulty with a teacher who was unenthusiastic about the subject, explaining, then I don’t feel compelled to do her work. So then, I always get it in late. But then she doesn’t care. Like she’ll always say, “I’ll take marks off” but then she doesn’t. So because she doesn’t do that, I’m just gonna give it to her late. When you don’t motivate people or you’re not making people interested in your subject [they won’t work hard].

Although Danny and Zoe are in the academic pathway and Vanessa is in the applied, they share the sentiment about the important relationship between challenge and success, and between the teacher’s expectations for the students.

Like Alyssa, Adam disagreed with the idea that streams influence motivation. He saw motivation as an intrinsic trait and suggested that, alternatively, “being motivated is a different thing. Typically…if you’re motivated, you’re going to be in a higher pathway most likely.”
Andrew agreed, stating “I don’t think what level you are motivates you, I think the kind of person you are does. Yeah so, personally I don’t really get motivated saying I’m in applied.”

Although several of the interviewees suggested that motivation is an inherent trait – reflecting a broader social discourse that perceives achievement as an intrinsic factor, instead of a social construct – Vanessa’s description was a counterpoint. She described how she wished that she had felt pressured — by her mom, her teachers, anyone who could have pushed her in school – to help her to develop that sense of drive within herself.

**Jenna:** But you find it hard to develop that pressure inside? That sense of drive?

**Vanessa:** Oh yeah. I can’t. I don’t know how. I don’t know how to wake up at 7:30 in the morning and get ready and go to school on time and be motivated and ready for the day, ready to learn. I can’t. I don’t know how people do that. I can’t do it. It’s too much for me. My mind is always somewhere else when I’m at school, I don’t even pay attention. Then I just go home and I’m like, “Oh wow, I have a whole pile of homework to do, how am I gonna do this?” And then I just put it off and I don’t do it ever, I never get it though and then my teacher is like, “K, this is the deadline, like if you don’t hand these in, I’m writing the final report cards,” and I’m like, “Oh.” So I just cram and do a bunch of homework and then I just wing the exam like I said earlier.

Vanessa was visibly troubled any time she talked about achievement and regrets throughout our conversation. She suggests above that she does not feel confident or competent in school. She does not seem to know how to organize her time or to balance multiple projects at once; these are large barriers to her success. Yet, schools do not often teach these skills explicitly; we expect students to have mastered them by the time they reach high school, but how much effort is made to help students who do not have them? Time management is a skill, not a dimension of intellect, but it weighs heavily on Vanessa’s ability to be successful. She very obviously wanted to do better in school, and struggled not only with learning, but in figuring out the steps that it would take to be achieve the success that she wanted. Vanessa talked about being afraid of making the same mistakes in college, when the stakes are higher and she is paying for her education. She said,
That’s why I wish people pushed me in high school, even though I know I should be doing it myself. I wish people, growing up I wish my mom was on me like strict, because I wouldn’t be here right now, I would be in academic getting 90s, honour roll every year like my sister, like my sister did. She excelled in school and I didn’t…. My mom didn’t pay attention to me because my sister was going through high school when I was just getting into high school.

Vanessa also admitted that when her mom would ask her if she was on top of her schoolwork, she would lie to get her mom to leave her alone. Her description highlights the importance of parental involvement in students’ school success, and draws attention to parental influence which bears heavily on students’ school success, but may be difficult for teachers to see and support from the classroom.

Another element of motivation was the influence of goal-setting, even as long-term, vague plans. Zoe discussed this in depth. As stated previously, Zoe was highly conscious of her interests from a young age and that helped her to really explore and participate in the arts throughout her experience with public education. We also discussed how this early exposure to her interests helped her to find a direction for not only her public education years, but her life in general.

**Jenna:** It sounds like for you, knowing what you wanted to do at a young age really helped you to be motivated and have a plan, and that plan also helped you to stay motivated.

**Zoe:** Yeah, it’s kinda like a circle.

It would be impossible to capture the powerful influence of goal-setting on success in this section; it is a subject unto itself. It does have a bearing on high school streaming, however, and as students repeatedly referenced it throughout our conversations, it is clear that its influence is important and notable. Furthermore, the ways that it manifests across the different pathways are problematic and speak to some of the ways that social class silently underwrites the structures of public education.
Summary

Students shared how much their interest influences their academic success and enjoyment, even stating that having one class they enjoy in the timetable can improve their achievement and engagement in other courses. Zoe further stated that finding an area of interest early in life can have a positive influence on engagement with school in general, as well as a sense of drive and ambition. Many students also confirmed that their program pathway has a major influence on their sense of motivation in school, and that being in the enriched and academic pathways motivates students to do well, while applied classes have the opposite effect. Another key idea that emerged was the value of teacher expectation, especially that it is important for teachers to have high expectations for all students, not just for students in the academic and enriched pathways.
Chapter 7
What Happens Next? Post-Secondary Effects

Introduction

Another concern underlying this research project was the ways that opportunity plays out differently for students in the different pathways. In Ontario, universities will only accept students who have obtained “University” pathway credits; students can apply to colleges with either “University” or “College” pathway courses. As stated earlier, in grade eleven, the language of pathways changes from applied, academic, and open to college and university, with a few courses (primarily in maths and sciences) labelled as “mixed” courses, accepting students from both the applied and academic pathway. Choosing courses in their grade eight year, before entering high school, is a big decision that students often do not truly understand. In this chapter, students share how much they knew about the course selection process and its effect on post-secondary education, down the road. We also discuss the risk and fear associated with moving from one pathway to another, and how it impacts students’ tendency to stay in one pathway despite changing thoughts about post-secondary plans.

Opportunity: “I just knew that [one course] sent me to university and one sent me to college”

While it may appear that students make their post-secondary decisions in grade eleven, students cannot enter the university pathway at grade eleven unless they have obtained the previous grade ten academic credit; for example, students cannot take grade eleven university English unless they have taken grade ten academic English. Further, to take academic classes in grade ten, students have to have obtained the corresponding credit in the grade nine academic course. In rare cases, students will be allowed to take a grade ten academic course after completing the corresponding grade nine applied credit.

Conversely, students can move from the academic to applied or from the university to college credits at any stage; so, a student could take a grade ten academic credit and then a grade eleven college, or a grade eleven university credit and then a grade twelve college credit. Typically, what occurs, though, is that students must choose between the academic, applied and locally developed pathways during their grade eight year, before they enter high school. As a
classroom teacher, I have seen students try to change their pathways, moving “up” to academic or university courses at different points in their high school careers, and the process is frustrating to watch; to move from an applied to academic course, students usually need to obtain the approval of various adults (guidance counsellors, classroom teachers, administrators, etc.) before they can make a switch. This approval is typically based on past performance and achievement.

These choices are high-stakes choices, regardless of how or when they occur. Most troubling is that students are not aware of the full weight of the decisions that they are making, or the doors that they close when they make their choices. This became very clear throughout my interviews. Several students made reference to the connection between their pathway choices and their post-secondary plans: Chantelle, Zoe, Danny, Jeremy, and Adam. They articulated, in various ways, that they know now but more importantly that they had known when they made their choices – at the beginning of high school – where their choices would lead them. For example, Danny said, “I never really understood the difference between the two courses were, I just knew that one sent me to university and one sent me to college….my dad told me that it was easier to switch down than switch up. So I was like, I might as well stick in academic and see.” Similarly, Zoe said, “I always thought of it as academic, you’re going to university, applied you’re going to college. That’s how I saw it. That’s not always right, but that’s how I saw it, So I just thought “I’ll just take academic everything!” and so that’s why.” She said that she has known that she wanted to go to university since she was as young as grade three or four, which may have been influenced by her mom being a teacher, or by having an older brother.

Mimi, Vanessa, Andrew, and Alyssa did not know about the connection between course pathways and post-secondary education options. For Alyssa in the enrichment program, this is not a disastrous consequence. However, for Mimi, Vanessa, and Andrew, this is problematic in a lot of ways. Mimi, Vanessa, Andrew (and Alyssa, in the Scholar program) stated that they had made the decision to enter applied courses in grade nine as a result of their academic achievement and ability in elementary school. Andrew further stated that the idea that applied led to college did not come up in his classes until grade ten. Vanessa said,

I wasn’t even thinking of [post-secondary plans], in grade nine, I don’t even remember in grade nine, it didn’t cross my mind […] I was just going to school, what my mom wanted
– me to go to school, get a high school education, I didn’t think of the future. What I would be doing four years from then; I just went to school.

While these students may not have chosen to pursue a post-secondary university education anyway, this lack of information results in a lack of agency for those students, more troubling when coupled with the concept of social class streaming. While school guidance counsellors and teachers may discuss this with students regularly and openly, the students that I spoke with did not have a clear understanding of the process, and those who suffer are the applied pathway students. The People for Education (2016) report *Ontario’s Guidance Counsellors: Spread thinly in an environment of growing expectations* describes the climate of guidance counselling, suggesting that guidance counsellors have too many demands and too little time to appropriately support their students. In high schools, provincial funding provides “one full-time secondary guidance counsellor for every 385 secondary students in a board. For elementary schools, that number plummets to one full-time counsellor for every 5000 elementary students” (People For Education, 2016, p. 5). This number is as high as 595 students per counsellor in 10% of schools surveyed (People for Education, 2016, p. 5). These numbers alone suggest that students cannot be getting the support and counselling that they need to make choices that support them in successfully navigating the complex high school diploma system.

During my interview with Mimi, this lack of clarity and its effect became obvious when I asked whether she had post-secondary plans yet. She confirmed that she did, and listed off a combination of colleges, universities, and private institutions. When I asked questions to clarify, it became obvious that Mimi did not know that she could not get into university with her college pathway credits. I felt awful delivering the message.

**Mimi:** I do. Yeah I do wanna go to university, but I have to … I feel like, you can still get into university. But I don’t know, I don’t know, that’s soo dumb. Can’t you still be getting really good marks in an applied class and still get into university? What if you’re getting 90s in applied?? That’s so [stupid]!

**Jenna:** Yeah, you can’t go into university if you don’t have university courses.

**Mimi:** Yeah, but the school I really wanted to go to was Randolph, in Toronto. But I don’t know. I think that’s gonna affect it though, that’s definitely gonna affect it. I feel
like there’s lots of universities and more opportunities. But I feel like, I don’t know, once you’re out of university you’re out of university. I feel like applied students can still do the same thing once you’re out of university. It’s just…School is so stupid.

Mimi’s assertion that applied and academic students can do the same jobs after exiting the school system is an interesting critique of the narrowness of the system, and recalls Sternberg’s criticism of what our education system values. Sternberg (2007) suggests that our explicit theories of intelligence, which serve as the basis for almost all our measurements of abilities and achievement, fail to do justice to people’s implicit theories of intelligence, not only in the East but even in the West. The practical problem solving and social competence skills that people believe to be important to adaptation are largely ignored under our present regime of assessment. In other words, we are creating tests that simply are too narrow. (p. 152)

Although Mimi is incorrect to some degree – some professions require a university education for entry-level positions – she effectively points to a shortcoming of the public education system, which is at times out of step with post-secondary education and work trends. As an arts student, I wondered whether Mimi was right; would going to university instead of college truly improve her employability? If not, was it only the prestige associated with university – and consequently, the prestige, in high school, of taking university-bound courses – that she was missing out on?

Next, I asked whether it would have changed her pathway choices if she had known that university was not an option from the applied pathway. Mimi’s answer almost made me sadder, as she seemed so resigned to her fated placement in the applied pathway.

Mimi: No.

Jenna: You wouldn’t have chosen the academic classes?

Mimi: No. I can’t do academic. I can’t. I don’t know, I don’t know if I could do academic, you know what I mean? Because I’ve never been in it. I don’t know if it’s kinda like doing applied, I don’t know what academic classes are about. But I’m in applied for a reason. And I’ve been in applied and sometimes I haven’t gotten the best marks so I don’t think I belong in academic classes and if that’s something I can’t handle
that’s something I can’t handle but I also think it’s dumb that people in applied classes can’t get into a university. What if you’re unsure if you can really like, and I get that you can do summer school and switch up into academic but what if it’s something you’re unsure about and you, you’re scared. Say you’re getting good marks like 80s and stuff in applied but you’re too scared to switch up to academic because you don’t want those marks going down. Why would… that university, it’s kinda dumb that you don’t have the choice of university because you could still get really good marks in university, but you could be too scared to just be in an academic class, if that makes sense.

Mimi states that she is “in applied for a reason,” yet the reasons that she gave for being in applied throughout the interview seem inadequate at best, especially with the realization that they are not going to get her where she wants to go. Furthermore, through conversations with other students, it is clear that pathway placement is also a reflection of other factors, such as socio-economic status; so Mimi “belongs” in applied perhaps not through any fault of her own, but as a reflection of the socially constructed hierarchy that streams students into pathways based on factors that they have no control over and thus cannot overcome on their own.

Mimi says that she stays in applied because she is afraid of moving to academic classes and experiencing less success, yet in doing so she is giving up on her goal to attend university. So what, then, is success? Giving up on her goals to obtain potentially higher grades in a pathway that will not take her where she wants to go? Mimi’s suggestion that she is afraid she cannot handle the work in academic classes also sounds more like a concern for work ethic than for learning style, which highlights another problem in the way that we talk about courses. Several students (including Danny and Vanessa) talked about the differences in work habits between the pathways, not in the learning itself; this is not reflective of the language of ministry documents, which again, state that

Academic courses develop students’ knowledge and skills through the study of theory and abstract problems. These courses focus on the essential concepts of a subject and explore related concepts as well. They incorporate practical applications as appropriate. Applied courses focus on the essential concepts of a subject and develop students’ knowledge and skills through practical applications and concrete examples. Familiar situations are used to illustrate ideas, and students are given more opportunities to
experience hands-on applications of the concepts and theories they study. (Ontario Secondary Schools Grades 9 to 12, Program and Diploma Requirements, 2011, p. 65)

The students’ preoccupation with work habits suggests that perhaps teachers, guidance counsellors, school administrators, parents, etc. need to reconsider the ways that we talk about pathways, or even the ways that we approach teaching in these pathways. The idea of fear or of being intimidated by great risk was a repeated theme across conversations, and perhaps reflects some of the conversations we had about stigma, the ways that teachers talk about the other pathways, and the ways that students perceive each other.

Risk and Fear: “I wouldn’t really understand and probably fail, I don’t want to waste my time like that here”

Several students talked about fear and risk throughout our conversations, and I was amazed and saddened at its power. Chantelle talked about considering a change from Scholar to academic, and the fear of losing friendships. For other students, risk was related to academic performance and achievement, and its influence was paralyzing.

Again, this reminded me of when I asked Mimi what prevented her from changing to the academic pathway, and she described how she felt comfortable where she was. After, we discussed how the applied pathway would not allow her to attend college, but her answer about changing to academic classes did not change.

Jenna: So you’re saying it’s the risk, the fear of the risk of your grades dropping?

Mimi: Yeah, that’s why I’d be scared to go up into academic, because I know all the work that I can handle and even sometimes in applied I can’t even handle the work that’s thrown at me. […] Academic I feel like would even be more than what I have now.

Vanessa echoed this sentiment when we discussed changing pathways. She said she did not move to the academic classes because, “I wouldn’t be able to handle it. I’d get too stressed, my anxiety would get too bad, and I’d just give up completely and stop going.” Andrew also said, “I [understand] everything I was doing, so let’s say going into academic where I’d have to, I wouldn’t really understand and probably fail, I don’t want to waste my time like that here, I’m here to learn, not retake classes. So stick with something I know and do it.” Andrew was not as
daunted as the others, and seemed to feel no resentment or loss that he was in the applied pathway. When I clarified, he agreed that it was the risk of not achieving the credit and the fear of the work being harder that kept him in applied. This finding bothered me deeply; fear and risk actively keep students from maximizing their potential (i.e. keeping all post-secondary options open), and that fear keeps doors closed and opportunity limited.

The frustration and disappointment that Vanessa felt also resulted in a great sense of regret. She told me that if she could go back to grade nine and redo her high school education, she would. When I asked about why she could not go back and make some changes at this point, she said “because I should have had this when I was in grade nine, it should have been ready since I was in grade nine but I wasn’t so, I don’t know what I’m gonna do.”

**Post-Secondary Plans: “No one ever said they were going to university but it was just assumed”**

Post-secondary education and plans were a big topic of conversation with the students. Out of all of the students, only two – Vanessa and Adam – planned to go into the workplace, from their college pathway. Both planned to attend school after (Vanessa to college, and Adam to a specific trade school) after getting some work experience and saving some money. Chantelle (from the enrichment pathway) and Mimi planned to attend college, with Danny undecided about college or university. The largest contingent of students planned to attend university: Alyssa, Jeremy, Adam and Zoe, again with Danny as yet undecided. These plans both reflected and disrupted the stereotypes that students referred to in their interviews.

Many students referred to post-secondary education when they described students in other pathways. Chantelle said, “I think that the applied way is more hands-on, working in the workplace field and then academic is more like people who are gonna go to labs, or be lawyers or be doctors…so it’s just different ways of going to your career, I guess.” She perceived pathway placement to be heavily influenced by how students planned to advance after high school, which – according to the interviews – only seems to be valid for students in academic or enrichment courses. When Zoe described the applied pathway, she said that in grade eleven, it was more about students who want to pursue apprenticeships. She said,
Yeah, apprenticeships after school, they wanna go right into the work force and start doing things. And then academic is going to school, going to university and getting a degree in something. And then Scholar kids um, are really go-getters, they’re trying in school, they’re always doing something.

Post-secondary education also seemed to be a topic of discussion in some students’ classes. Chantelle described how the enrichment pathway teachers often talk about school. She said they “always tell us you need to go to university, and I’m like, I don’t wanna go to university, I wanna go to college.” Although she was unsure why the teachers encourage university so much, she also noted that they did research about post-secondary education pathways in “a few classes,” including her SHSM class, not just her Scholar classes. Jeremy also said that when he was in Scholar, the teachers had talked about university a lot. He said especially in careers, she just talked to us like, you guys are definitely going into university, she would say that before she would start her sentence, that was just like a clarification, since you guys are going to university. No one ever said they were going to university but it was just assumed, Scholar.

He also said that he had heard it a little in his academic classes, after leaving the Scholar pathway, but not as much.

Andrew said the opposite, when I asked whether teachers talk about college in their college pathway classes. He said, “Not too much, there’s that rare occasion when it comes up. Yeah, it’s not an everyday thing.” Once again, this made me wonder about the influence of expectations on students, whether they come from teachers, parents, or other influential figures. Students in academic and Scholar had been exposed to these conversations in their classes, but Andrew, in applied, had not.

Post-secondary plans have been one of the most commonly explored factors of tracking research in the past, especially as it concerns social mobility. Curtis, Livingstone, and Smaller (1992) address the specific concern of social class mobility correlated with parental education levels and income levels, stating that “employers’ and professional-class kids are much more likely to go to university than are working-class kids – somewhere between two-and-a-half to
four times as likely” (p. 10). Parents’ income and educational levels were not included in this project’s interviews due to ethical constraints, but research states that

the high school system streams people in keeping with their parents’ class position and occupation. In the past decade in Ontario, about 90% of students from professional families were enrolled in Advanced-level programmes. Only about half of the students whose parents have unskilled occupations were enrolled in Advanced programs. Conversely, children whose parents had unskilled occupations were found to be about ten times as likely as those from professional families to end up in Basic-level programmes (Anisef et al, 1980; King, 1986; Cheng et al, 1989)” (Curtis, Livingstone, and Smaller, 1992, p 13).

In this example, the language refers to the previous tracking structure where “Advanced” was the top level and “Basic” was the bottom level of streaming. Although parental data was not included in my project, it is worthwhile to note that of the nine interviewees, 66% were actively considering university after high school. Of the remaining three students, only one planned to attend college after school; the others had indefinite plans to enter the workplace. More explicitly, all of the students exiting the academic/university pathway were heading for post-secondary education, most at university; of the students exiting the applied/college pathway, only one planned to go on to post-secondary education right away. Whether or not we can consider their parents’ educational and socio-economic profiles, only those students exiting the academic pathway were going on to the sort of post-secondary trajectory that give them access to higher status occupations; the others were bound for the workplace, with hopes for a return to formal education further in an unreliable future.

Uninformed and Uncertain: “They just kinda gave us a paper and we picked it and I just kinda chose it”

One of the more elusive subjects that emerged in the interviews was how often students felt uninformed about course selection and the pathways at school. We talked about how informed and prepared students felt at the beginning of their high school careers, but it also came up at other times.
Andrew said that he did not feel entirely confident when he was choosing his courses initially because all he and his peers received when picking their courses were “pieces of paper that said what they were, they didn’t really go into detail about what they were and how you did them.” He did appreciate how course selection is done at the school currently, which includes attending the computer lab and having access to better descriptions. He said that he had to change courses in grade nine as a result of not being informed. He did feel informed, however, about choosing his pathway (applied). Adam shared similar sentiments of feeling uninformed about his course selections. He said,

they just kinda gave us a paper and we picked it and I just kinda chose it. Cause we went to [the high school] that one night, and I remember talking to the person who was talking about the business course and they said you learn about all the computer programs, it’s like the basics like word, excel and power point. It builds off into computer programming which I’m taking now, which I’d like to aim to so I did. So that’s why I took that one. but other than that I wasn’t really informed, other than that night. That was my only influence.

Adam’s pathway choice was predetermined for him, as he had applied to and gotten acceptance for the Scholar pathway.

Vanessa, also from the applied/college pathway, likewise spoke about feeling uninformed. When I asked, she said, “Nope. We didn’t get a good tour of the school at all, because I went to [a different school in the city] in grade nine, I don’t know, basically what I said earlier, wasn’t ready for high school.” She also said that student teachers had come in to talk to her grade eight class about high school. She said,

one of those students came in and taught us about high school and what the changes were gonna be like. And we went like to the school and then they helped us, they told us what classes we were gonna pick out, and what we have to do when we go into grade nine, which was nothing like they said. They didn’t really prepare us.

**Jenna:** Ok, it was nothing like they said. Can you expand on that?
Vanessa: They said we’d have to get two [elective] classes…then we’d have to do all these classes and they said high school would be easy, grade nine would be easy, but I failed grade nine. I failed two classes in grade nine, and it was a lot harder on me than they said it was gonna be because it was such a change, going from being in the same class every single day to switching between four. It was really different. It’s easier now, four years now, I’ve gotten experience but grade nine was brutal.

Throughout the interview, Vanessa gave the impression that she was overwhelmed and felt like she had nowhere to turn for support with her school challenges.

Perhaps the most distressing of the students who discussed feeling uninformed was Mimi, who (as discussed earlier) did not know that she could not attend university after high school, as she had taken applied/college pathway courses. This may reflect Mimi’s own engagement with school and her during- and post-high school planning, but to put blame on her entirely is too simple, and reads a bit like blaming the victim for her own problem. Furthermore, in combination with the lack of clarity that many students noted in regard to many areas connected to programming, pathways, and implications, it is incumbent on the school to take some responsibility for fully educating our students to make these crucial, life-altering decisions.

Summary

One of my primary concerns in this project and as a teacher is with the opportunities that are and are not available to students as a result of their public education. Conversations with students revealed that the all of the students I interviewed from the applied pathway did not know about the consequences of their pathway choices for post-secondary education. The students indicated that there is a lack of clarity around pathway and course selection in high school. They also discussed how the risk of grades dropping and their fears that they would perform worse in a different pathway kept them from moving to a pathway that would provide them with more post-secondary options. Additionally, students noted that their teachers talk about post-secondary plans in different ways depending on whether they are in academic or applied courses. Overall, it appeared that students did not receive the same information about post-secondary opportunities or exposure to post-secondary options, which is a serious issue; the importance of the choices they make in high school cannot be overstated, as these choices put them on routes that will influence the rest of their adult lives. It is therefore crucial that students
are making informed, confident decisions, and that the education system supports these decision-making processes for *all* students.
Chapter 8
Influences

Introduction

While their peers have a strong and well-documented impact on students’ day-to-day lives, their self esteem, their choices, etc., many of the participants discussed how their parents and teachers influenced their course choices and the directions of their academic trajectories. Kelly (2004), in an exploration of placement in math classes in the U.S., found that

Students who have a parent with a college degree are approximately five times more likely to be in the highest math sequence than are students whose parents did not attend college. […] Having a parent with a college degree makes one almost 20% more likely to be in one of the top two math sequences. This is not a small advantage. (p. 647)

Parents are able to influence their children’s pathway placement through not only direct influence, but also through general expectations for performance (Kelly, 2004, p. 647). Teachers also have a perceptible influence on academic outcomes, as many of the students discussed in our interviews. Notably, teachers influence the pathways but are also influenced by student pathway placement – again, students discussed this in our conversations, but it is also explored in Wheelock’s study that suggests teachers have higher expectations for students in higher tracks and lower expectations for students in lower tracks (in Ansalone, 2001, p. 41). Richardson (1989) also found that “teachers more often based their expectations for student success on track placement and not on school records,” a sentiment that is sadly echoed in our conversations in this chapter (in Ansalone, 2001, p. 41). As they shared, some students were fortunate to have both parents and teachers, while others could have benefited from the involvement of one or both.

Teacher influence: “She just encouraged me to just stay with it”

Teachers have an immensely powerful opportunity to influence students, which is why our roles are both so important and so scrutinized. Teacher influence manifested in both subtle and major ways throughout my interviews with the students. Students discussed the importance of teacher expectations, as previously discussed. Several students discussed their grade eight
teachers’ influence on their course selections for high school. I discussed this effect with Chantelle:

**Jenna:** So how did you come to know about the Scholar program?

**Chantelle:** Umm, my grade eight teacher’s son went to CCI and he still goes here, and he was in the Scholar for one year, but then he dropped out too…

**Jenna:** So then your grade eight teacher talked about it a bit?

**Chantelle:** Yeah, she was like “If you’re going to CCI,” which I wanted to for the SHSM, she was like “You should do Scholar too,” and I was like, “That sounds cool, alright!”

It is easy, sometimes, to forget how impressionable our students are, especially when some of them seem to resist at every opportunity. While some influences are positive, like Chantelle’s experience, some are not; for example, Andrew’s experience with his grade eight teacher who suggested he enroll in the locally developed pathway. Zoe also spoke of having a positive experience with her grade eight teacher, who encouraged her to go in a direction that ultimately, Zoe really appreciated and benefited from.

**Zoe:** So again it was, I was wondering if I’d wanna do history and geography in French, and she said go into French immersion no matter what, cause you’re good at it, and it’d be a shame to drop it out, drop out of it straight away, but then you can make that decision later if you think you’ve become better at French, if you think you’ve improved, or even if you start it you can drop it and take it in English if you want. She just encouraged me to just stay with it until I knew I wouldn’t be able to do it, and that didn’t happen – I was pretty good at it, so it just worked.

While it is reassuring to hear of students’ positive experiences, it is bittersweet; I wonder whether students who struggle in school experience the reinforcement of a teacher’s positive encouragement, or if struggling students more often receive the message that Andrew did: follow the path of least resistance, and just try to get by.
**Parents: “I think it’s all what you’re exposed to”**

I was curious about the influence that parents had on students’ experiences of being in the pathways, and how much they influenced where students were placed and whether they stayed there. In the conversations, this came up most often when we discussed who had helped students to choose their courses for high school. Nearly all of the students had been supported by their parents in making their course selections, which was both surprising and reassuring. This brings to mind the research of Spade, Columba, and VanFossen (1997) however, and whether all students’ parents are informed enough to help them choose their courses in a way that is supportive and effective. Spade, Columba, and VanFossen (1997) suggest that schools who take a less structured approach to course selection in areas of affluence may increase students’ opportunities to enroll in higher-level courses (Useem 1992b), but not in working-class schools, where the backgrounds and experiences of parents often do no provide the information necessary to assess their children’s potential in the school system. Consequently, parents in working-class schools are less likely to become involved in school decisions (for similar conclusions, see Baker and Stevenson 1986; Lareau 1989; Useem 1992b). If guidance is not provided by counselors and teachers, working-class students and parents will be left on their own. (p. 124)

This may be especially prominent in schools like the one I teach at, where a shift has moved a lot of the course selection process online. While this is a constructive move for efficiency, and provides many students and families with the opportunity to explore course opportunities and descriptions online before selections must be made, it is also important to remember that some families do not have computers or internet access in the home; unfortunately, technology sometimes exacerbates already existing equity issues. There is a lot of jargon and technicality associated with course selection and pathway planning, which does not always facilitate a supportive environment for all students, parents, and families. It is difficult to imagine that school boards are not aware of this obscurity, but to suggest it is intentionally so is a dangerous allegation indeed.

Chantelle said that after her mom found out about the Scholar program, she “really pushed for it, once she heard from [the] teacher that there was a cool program.” She also said that her mom is a big reason that she does not change out of the program, even though she sometimes
wants to for a combination of peer and academic reasons. Like her other academic peers, Chantelle benefits from her mom’s involvement in her school life, which encourages her in building capacity and opportunity through education. This is of special significance as Chantelle mentioned (as noted earlier) that she and her mother had been on welfare for an undisclosed amount of time; to some degree, Chantelle was able to use school to find social mobility.

Jeremy’s mom had also played a big role in his educational trajectory. Jeremy was raised by a single mom who had emigrated to Canada, which he felt plays a big role in both of their lives. He stated that his mom was adamant that he would attend university; that was the ultimate sign of success for her. His own perspective was different, however, and he said that employment also had a big role in the idea of success. He said that if he went to university and never got a job, he would have “succeeded in my mom’s eyes, but if I don’t get a job, I don’t think I’ve succeeded in my own eyes.” Jeremy’s mom was also a big influence on him enrolling in the Scholar program. When he was deciding which program to pursue, he said, “The fact that she knew about the Scholar program, she was like, ‘You’re capable, Jeremy, I think you can handle it, just go for it, make me proud,’” basically. So I went for it.”

Adam’s parents seemed slightly less involved in his academia than Jeremy’s mom was, but they were still an important presence. He described his parents as “somewhat” involved, but went on to explain that they were more preoccupied with supporting his younger sister, who is not as much a naturally excellent student, like Adam is. He agreed when I suggested that they are not overly involved in his academic life, but they are interested enough to keep him in the Scholar program.

Other students’ parents influenced which courses they took, in implicit and explicit ways. Alyssa’s parents helped her to choose to attend the Scholar program and the French immersion program. Both Danny’s and Zoe’s parents had influenced them to take the academic/university pathway in school, as it was the most esteemed level. They also influenced the subject areas that the students pursed. Danny said, “My parents definitely helped me a lot with my course selections because I wouldn’t have taken music without my dad being like, you should do this because you have time to figure out what you wanna do.” This in turn influenced Danny’s consideration of music as a post-secondary education option.

Zoe’s subject of interest was also influenced by a parent. She said,
I was influenced, my mom’s an art teacher, so say she’d been a science teacher I would love science. It’s all what you’re, I think it’s all what you’re exposed to. So people whose parents are just general things, not lower jobs, just like a random job, and it’s not so specific to a school subject, they just are free, they’re really really free to pick whatever they like, and then me because I’m so influenced by art, we always have art in our house, we always have random projects everywhere, then I just liked it cause it was there so then I just kept with it.

Mimi’s and Vanessa’s parents seemed to have the least involvement in their school lives. Mimi’s mom and another teacher from Mimi’s elementary school helped her to choose which high school she attended and which pathway; she chose to attend CCI because of its specialized SHSM program. Mimi stated, though, that she had chosen her courses herself. She said,

I just picked my classes just because I picked them. Just because they sounded interesting. I didn’t really get anybody to help me really with my courses that I picked. I kinda just picked the course that I wanted to do, or that interested me the most.

However, when Mimi experienced difficulty with school – both academic and behavioural – according to Mimi, her mom struggled to deal with the challenges. An initial agreement between Mimi and her mom had stated that Mimi would attend a different high school in the city if her academic career at CCI was not going well. When her grades and attendance started to slip, her mom took her to a different school but they could not admit her as it was the wrong time of year for a new registration. After that, Mimi said, “My mom just hasn’t had the energy to deal with it anymore so she’s like, “I’m not even moving you anymore.”” According to Mimi’s description, her mom was struggling to address the complex school issues Mimi was facing, and seeking resources did not help. Mimi’s academic performance appeared to take a back seat to other issues she was dealing with.

Vanessa’s mom also sounded less involved in her school life that her academic peers’ parents. Vanessa’s described how her mom did not push her to excel in school. She said,

That’s probably another reason why I slack off because my mom didn’t kick my ass to do all the work. I kept lying to her like “Yeah it’s done, I did it” and then I just continued doing it grade 9, gr 10, 11, even this year I still do it.
Vanessa also said, “My mom didn’t pay attention to me because my sister was going through high school when I was just getting into high school.” While I hesitate to assign blame to Vanessa’s and Mimi’s mothers – nor to excuse the girls from responsibility themselves – it is clear that there is a distinct different in the school involvement of the academic and enrichment students’ parents and the applied students’ parents. This information, coupled with the knowledge that parent involvement can be a major factor in students’ academic success, indicates that further exploration may be possible in this area, as well as potential for positive growth.

Summary

The study participants did not seem to privilege the influence of their parents over their teachers, or vice versa; they both affected students’ choices, in positive and negative ways. Although it would be ideal for students to have both, it seems most important that students have positive, encouraging adults in their lives who know both the students and their potential, and who work to identify and develop capacity in their students, instead of categorizing students in such a way that their growth is stunted and their aptitude unrealized.
Introduction

The intention of this project was to explore the experiences of high school students as they move through grades nine to twelve, separated into course pathways. While some of the students’ revelations were surprising — including some of their more positive, inclusive perspectives on cliques and interpersonal relationships — some only reflected and deepened my own suspicions that pathways have an insidious, hard-to-measure influence on our school atmosphere and on students’ experiences in high school and adolescence.

One of the evident areas of difficulty and/or growth surrounds the idea of intelligence and what it means to be smart. The idea of being smart is connected to school success and school aptitude, as it is correlated to course selection; therefore, students who are enrolled in the “higher” streams (academic and enrichment) are seen as the smarter and more capable students.

This also appeared to be wrapped up in ideas of success, where students who were able to take classes in the academic pathway were currently seen as more successful — and advancing toward more success — than students who opted for the “easier” applied classes. This was evident in students’ language, when they spoke of students who could take academic classes but chose to take applied instead, and earned higher marks; this was almost seen as a false achievement, as if they were “cheating” by “moving down” to the applied pathway to artificially inflate their marks.

Participants spent a lot of time responding to how streaming structured and separated the student body. Their insight showed that streaming shapes the ways that they see each other and themselves; while this is a positive effect for some students, who are perceived as capable, successful, and dominant, others are typecast as unmotivated and incapable. The students were very sensitive to a hierarchy in their peer relationships, which affects their lives in small and large ways. Streaming appears to reflect and entrench pre-existing hierarchies that are tied to socio-economics, where the most affluent students enroll in the enriched and academic classes and the least wealthy are in applied and locally developed classes.

We also discussed how learning differs from one pathway to another. Personal interest had a major impact on students’ engagement and success in classes. We considered motivation
and its ties to pathways, where there appears to be more pressure and higher expectations for students in the enriched and academic classes. Students in the applied pathway spoke about how they wanted to be more motivated, but struggled to act on these feelings in an effective way.

Students’ discussions around post-secondary plans and opportunities reflected some of my concerns, especially regarding their mobility (or lack thereof). Although the students in academic and enriched classes were, for the most part, informed about their choices, the students in the applied pathway were not. Many students discussed the fears that prevented them from moving from one pathway to another (from academic to applied or vice versa) and the risks that were involved. Students did not know enough about course pathways to make informed, knowledgeable choices that would result in them gaining some agency or power. The ambiguity around course information and the risk and fear involved with moving between courses impact students during high school but more importantly, after school as their choices affect their post-secondary opportunities. For some students, this limits their ability to attain social class mobility after school ends.

Fortunately, teachers and parents have an influence over students’ course pathway choices and over their school performance. This is a positive insight; although some students discussed how their teachers’ and parents’ influences did not support school success, several talked about how they were positively influenced by the adults in their lives. This shows the possibility for teachers and supportive adults to inspire and encourage students as they move through high school and make important choices, and take action toward their post-secondary lives. Although many of the students’ insights were troubling, they also provided perspective about the opportunities we have to improve their experiences in high school.

Implications for the Field

Destreaming is one of the alternatives that is proposed by critics of school streaming and tracking, usually as a “reform in which students are placed intentionally in mixed-ability heterogeneous classes, [as] an attempt to remedy the negative effects of tracking” (Rubin, 2006, p. 4). Completely destreaming all high school courses, while appealing, is not presently a realistic solution to the problems that tracking creates. Too much of the structure of high school classes is already closely connected to the separation of students into academic, applied, and locally developed pathways, and the emergence of specialized programming like Advanced
Placement and the International Baccalaureate already make certain demands of timetabling. However, this does not mean that the status quo must remain undisturbed.

On a macro scale, several options exist. Nora Hyland (2006) makes an argument for selectively destreaming classes based on their content and its relation to the egalitarian goals of detracked education. She suggests that social studies are the ideal choice for a destreamed subject area because as a field, it addresses issues of democracy, equality, citizenship, and social justice. The aim of detracking to provide more equitable opportunities for students from all race and class backgrounds is consistent with the historical commitment of the social studies to a vital democracy dependent on the education and participation of all its citizens. (2006, p. 64)

She outlines concerns and suggested solutions in great detail, including developing a culture, parent involvement and buy-in, professional development and support, a slow phasing in of the new arrangement flexibility, reconsideration of routines, and support from the district and state (Hyland, 2006, p. 69). This could align well with courses that are currently mandatory for the OSSD, including grade nine geography and grade ten history.

On a smaller scale, administrators and policy makers may also reconsider the ways in which students are timetabled. Several students noted that even their open classes included many of the same students – as in when Alyssa described the many Scholar students in her physical education classes. Perhaps it is worth reviewing these courses as they are developed, instead of accepting what the computer software produces as the most and only possible version of student scheduling. The People for Education (2014) report on pathways describes some creative decision-making that has alleviated some of the downfalls of tracking:

In some schools, principals have made structural changes, including scheduling each subject’s applied, academic and locally developed courses in the same time block, so that students can transfer more easily between courses.

In schools with smaller student populations, or those facing declining enrolment, many principals raised concerns that this option is not available. Others identify barriers to midterm transfer if classes are full.
A small number of schools reported “stacking” credits, or “de-streaming,” by offering combined academic and applied classes, granting credits for either academic or applied based on how many expectations were met in either type of assignment. (p. 5)

This is a large undertaking in a school the size of the one in which I teach, but its payoffs would undoubtedly be worthwhile.

Additionally, this research begs that we consider delaying the point at which students have to make the influential decision to choose their post-secondary pathway. For example, students could decide at the end of their grade ten years – after they have completed their Careers credit – whether they intend to pursue the workplace, college, or university after high school. This is a major shift, and would theoretically permit students to proceed from a grade ten applied credit to a grade eleven university credit. Similarly, schools could permit students to move from applied to university credits without requiring a transfer credit to change pathways, or without requiring students to go back and retake the credit at their newly desired level (students who decide they want to go to university at the end of grade ten applied English currently need to take the grade ten academic English before proceeding to grade eleven university English).

These suggestions seem both hopelessly simplistic and impossible, and it is important to note that both would require many of the suggestions that Hyland (2006) makes for destreaming courses altogether: changing of the culture, parent support, phasing in of the rules, and professional development/support from the board and ministry. A large component of this shift would also make demands of classroom teachers and school administrators, primarily with regard to the language and theorizing of students that currently favours students in academic and enriched pathways.

Currently, as noted by several students, the language of teachers and school officials tends to deficitize students who are not in the so-called higher pathways of high school education. Danny was not mistaken when he noted that there is a difference in the way that teachers talk both about and to students in the different pathways. Providing opportunities for students to move more easily between the various pathways would require a paradigmatic shift in the ways that we view and talk about students; it would require us to stop talking about the pathways hierarchically, and it would require us to stop labelling and assigning students inflexibly to specific pathways at the beginning of their high school careers. These changes are
both grand and subtle in scale; it would mean avoiding phrases like “moving down” to applied or advising students to “work harder if you want to be in academic classes.” This change would also require classroom teachers to see students’ potential, and conceptualize their students from a mindset that believes in the ability of students to grow, change, and advance their abilities throughout high school – no more “s/he is not an academic student” or “he belongs in applied.” Finally, it would require teachers to set high expectations for behaviour, work habits, and work output for all of their students, across all classes, believing that every student is capable of school achievement.

Another possible avenue is to find ways to integrate students socially outside of class time. This includes specifically designing extracurricular and whole-school activities to promote socializing between pathway groups and social cliques. This could include assemblies and whole-school activities like track and field days, school pride days, or celebrations, where students are deliberately placed in groups that cause inter-group interaction and could even have a teacher or other adult to support the interaction.

Daunting as it may seem, these shifts in language and in practice may in fact prove to be small steps towards a more equitable, inclusive and empowering school environment. This project and the insights from the student participants revealed some uncomfortable information about our school and its function. While I can understand the difficulties associated with recognizing these multiple, unhappy disclosures (not the least of the reasons being that I will continue to work with these students and colleagues in an environment that is undeniably inequitable), I believe that acknowledging these problems is essential to dialogue and forward progress. Action researcher Stephen Kemmis (2006) describes its importance aptly and movingly:

I believe that action research and practitioner research work that discovers no unwelcome truths, that avoids or shrinks from them or avoids telling these truths is not the kind of research needed to transform practices, our understandings of our practices or the institutional and historical circumstances in which we practice. (p. 474)
It is important that we accept our system’s current shortcomings as changeable, and move forward knowing that our short-term discomfort is worthwhile for major long-term gain.

Implications for Research

As stated, student perspectives are largely absent from the research about streaming, especially in Ontario. The data from this project gives some insight, but it is truly only a glimpse at what is a large, complicated issue. The relatively small data set (nine students from one high school in a small city) raises a lot of questions, but the questions and challenges raised by students beg for more attention and further study.

A lot of the most concerning matters derive from the hierarchy of pathways that gives more esteem to enriched and academic students, and characterizes applied and locally developed students as incompetent. This reflects previous research that talked about the connections between socio-economic status and school pathway placement, such as Curtis, Smaller, and Livingstone’s (1992) text. The students’ in-depth discussion of these social hierarchies also calls to mind the work of Anisef, Brown and Walters (2010), Khmelkov and Hallinan (1999), and Malamud and Pop-Eleches (2011), which include race in their exploration of tracking and its associated factors and effects. I did not include questions about race and ethnicity in my interview protocol because of the relatively small sample size and because the school board seemed to discourage it, in previous projects that attempted to collect ethnographic data; however, as the students’ descriptions of their experiences reflect problems similar to those explored in the aforementioned works, I strongly suggest that future research includes this dimension. This is particularly important given the school’s racial demographics. We are a small city without a lot of visible racial or ethnic diversity, but we are not without our own racial politics. In my own teaching career, I consistently teach more Aboriginal students in my applied and locally developed courses and although this did not emerge as a topic of discussion in my interviews, it is a significant factor. If a majority of our Aboriginal students are enrolled in these courses and we know the applied pathway placement is inhibiting their achievement and opportunities, we need to explore alternatives that provide this vulnerable population with opportunities to build capacity and find opportunity.

The students’ insights from this project point to the ways that school structures and the decisions made by adults can have huge implications for the youth who participate in these
structures. Further distressing is the fact that students are not even aware that these decisions are being made; they are so far removed from the decision-making process that the organizational arrangements are accepted as natural and fixed. We need to give students a language for talking about these problems; some struggled to answer the questions I asked because they did not even see the mechanisms that were at work, so they do not know how to resist them.

Truthfully, even most adults do not question the existence of tracking as it is such an accepted, ubiquitous component of the organization of high schools. Thus, the hierarchy that emerges from the structure of schools also seems natural, and fixed, and social mobility is limited. Students from the “bottom” of the academic ladder never have an opportunity to rise to the top, neither during nor after high school. Additionally, they experience major repercussions in their peer relationships as a result of their course placements.

More research is needed to explore the ways that school structures affect students’ relationships, self-esteem, and plans for the future. Whether positive or negative, nearly all of the research participants appeared to have internalized traits and beliefs about themselves, rooted in their experiences in different pathways. Their exposure to post-secondary options also differed. This appeared to favour students in the academic pathway, whose teachers and supportive adults had spoken to them about university, compared to the applied pathway students, who had been exposed to very little talk about post-secondary education in general.

This also gestures to another area of research that the project exposed, which is how students are placed in their pathways and how much knowledge they have of the pathway structure when they begin high school. Although there is a great deal of research about track placement from the U.S. and other contexts, very little exists in Ontario, especially recent research since the new curriculum was implemented in 1999 (moving from Basic, General, and Advanced to Locally Developed, Academic, and Applied). As students shared in the interviews, some were encouraged to enroll in a pathway due to their academic achievement in grade eight, while others were encouraged to enroll in a pathway based on their post-secondary aspirations. This also relates to concerns about the knowledge that students have of the system and how informed they are about the choices they make. This is an area of need in streaming research, as students demonstrated that these choices and gaps have implications for their agency and the power they experience – or do not experience – in public education.
It is also important to note that this is practitioner research, and my position as a classroom teacher provided a unique and valuable vantage point for the research. Practitioner research gives insight to problems in the education system from an emic perspective that cannot be reproduced; problems are visible from this point of view that may be difficult to ascertain from outside of the culture of the school itself. This project also shows the value of documenting and analyzing practice—how inquiry can support teachers to value students, and develop knowledge that can inform their own and others’ practices. Fundamentally, teaching through inquiry involves encouraging new and veteran teachers to ask and explore questions (not merely others’ answers): about who students are…and how they can create more equitable learning opportunities for all students. (Simon, 2012, p. 525)

This project seemed to only touch the surface of the implications of the current course pathway structure in Ontario, and point to a clear need for more research in this area.

Implications for My Practice

This project’s implications for my own project are diverse and immeasurable. This research project about streaming is only one part of what has been an invaluable experience for me as an educator, a researcher, and a citizen with an active voice.

I will be more conscious of my language henceforth, when I discuss the topic of course pathways with not only students and parents, but as well with my colleagues. Although I was mindful of it before, the sensitivity to language that students demonstrated extended beyond what I have previously considered.

One of the greatest surprises for me was the discussion around expectations. While I have attempted, especially in recent years, to raise the expectations that I have for students in all of my classes, I was not aware of the huge impact it has on their senses of self and their motivation for school. Vanessa’s description of how her teachers consistently give her breaks was eye-opening, and prompts me to set firm guidelines and deadlines for applied and academic students, with clear consequences for non-compliance (keeping in mind exceptional circumstances, and maintaining my equity lens in the classroom). It also means that I need to discuss post-secondary
education in a positive way with all of my students, fostering a culture of potential and positive expectations for the future.

Talking with the students also further reinforced the importance of my position and potential to be an advocate for students and families, in and outside of the classroom. Both the pre-existing research and the conversations with students reminded me that not all families are equipped with the language and knowledge of the system to effectively navigate its barriers, to encourage their students, and to help them see and recognize potential. It is important that students and parents are made aware of all of the opportunities and consequences that arise from course pathway decisions, and that they are supported when they want to make a potentially life-altering change.

Finally, this research project has implications for my practice as a teacher researcher. Putting on my researcher glasses and viewing my classroom through the lens and positionality of a researcher has given me a new perspective on what I do for a living. It has highlighted problems with my own practice, moments of dissonance that require further inquiry, and problems with the system that I am not content to accept. Taking on this practitioner-researcher role has shown me the influence that I can have on practice and professional development from the classroom, and it has shown me the power of teacher research to influence the field. One of the greatest benefits is the ability of research to give me an outlet for my daily frustrations; I am much more often disturbed by systemic problems than I am by students, and seeing myself as a practitioner-researcher has validated my concerns and given me greater agency to resist the perpetuation of issues that limit and stunt the potential of all learners to find opportunity, success, and empowerment through the public education system. Doing this work and engaging with these problems of practice in such a deep, deliberate, and thoughtful way has indisputably made me a better teacher; I have not only identified problems within our system, but I have come to believe unequivocally that these problems are resolvable, and that I and other teachers are uniquely positioned to make our education system better.
References


People for Education. (2013). *The Trouble With Course Choices in High School.*

People for Education. (2014). *Choosing Courses for High School.*


Dear Parent(s) or Guardians,

My name is Jenna Tsuchida and I teach in the English department at BCI. I am currently working on a Master of Arts degree at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education [OISE] at the University of Toronto and as part of my studies, I am conducting a thesis project.

Your child and other classmates in Gr 11 English have been invited to participate in my research project. Students who take part in this project will complete a one-hour verbal interview with me consisting of short and long answer questions.

The purpose of this project is to uncover how students’ course pathway selections (applied, academic, or enriched) affect their school experiences, their achievement, and their identities. This survey aims to access student perspectives and student voices, to begin to develop an understanding of barriers that prevent educational success and to potentially find new ways to engage students in authentic, valuable learning experiences.

I will be audio recording the interviews and then transcribing them. When I analyze the transcripts for ideas and themes and patterns, I will be removing any details that reveal the identity of the students so that the results are anonymous. No students will be identified in my thesis. What I write for my thesis will be a summary of the findings across all of the interviews. The thesis will be published in the thesis library at OISE. Results of the study will be shared with the principal and vice-principals, and potentially the teachers of BCI, in hopes of improving program delivery at our school. The information that is obtained during this research project will be confidential and will not be used for grading or evaluation of your child.

Your child's participation in this project is completely voluntary. Only those children who have parental permission and who want to participate will do so. The interviews will take place after school hours at BCI, and will take approximately one hour.

Please complete the informed consent portion of this letter below, indicating whether you do or do not give consent for your child to participate in this project and return this note to your child’s teacher as soon as possible.

If you have any questions about this project, please do not hesitate to contact me, my supervisor, or the OISE Research Oversight and Compliance Office.

Thank you,

Teacher

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Brantford Collegiate Institute and Vocational School
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(Please detach the lower portion and return to the school)

I, _____________________________________ (parent/guardian’s name) do / do not (circle) give consent for my child ____________________________ (child’s name) to participate in this research project.

__________________________________________                                  ______________
(Parent/guardian signature)                                                              (Date)
Appendix B

Dear Student,

My name is Jenna Tsuchida and I teach in the English department at BCI. I am currently working on a Master of Arts degree at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education [OISE] at the University of Toronto and as part of my studies, I am conducting a thesis project.

You and your classmates in Gr 11 English have been invited to participate in my research project. Students who take part in this project will complete a one-hour verbal interview with me consisting of short and long answer questions.

The purpose of this project is to uncover how students’ course pathway selections (applied, academic, or enriched) affect their school experiences, their achievement, and their identities. This survey aims to access student perspectives and student voices, to begin to develop an understanding of barriers that prevent educational success and to potentially find new ways to engage students in authentic, valuable learning experiences.

I will be audio recording the interviews and then transcribing them. When I analyze the transcripts for ideas and themes and patterns, I will be removing any details that reveal the identity of the students so that the results are anonymous. No students will be identified in my thesis. What I write for my thesis will be a summary of the findings across all of the interviews. The thesis will be published in the thesis library at OISE. Results of the study will be shared with the principal and vice-principals, and potentially the teachers of BCI, in hopes of improving program delivery at our school. The information that is obtained during this research project will be confidential and will not be used for grading or evaluation.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. Only those children who have parental permission and who want to participate will do so. The interviews will take place after school hours at BCI, and will take approximately one hour.

Please complete the informed consent portion of this letter below, indicating whether you do or do not give consent to participate in this project and return this note to your teacher as soon as possible.

If you have any questions about this project, please do not hesitate to contact me, my supervisor, or the OISE Research Oversight and Compliance Office.

Thank you,
Teacher
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Phone: 519.759.3210  Fax: 519.759.7943
jenna.tsuchida@granderie.ca

(Please detach the lower portion and return to the school)

I, _____________________________________ (student’s name) do / do not (circle) give consent to participate in this research project.

__________________________  ____________________
(Student signature)  (Date)
Appendix C

Interview Guide

1. **Other students’ perceptions: How do others see them?**
   1) What do people say about students in the applied pathway? The academic pathway? The Scholar pathway?
      a. Do you think that is accurate? Can you describe it for me?
   2) How do you think your teachers feel about teaching your applied/academic/Scholar classes?
      a. Can you explain that?

2. **Students’ perceptions of others: How do they see others?**
   1) How would you describe students in the other pathways?
   2) Do you enjoy the classes where you have applied/academic students in the same classroom? Explain…
   3) How would you describe students in the other pathways?
   4) What do you think classes must be like in the other streams? Describe what an applied class is like. Describe what an academic class is like. Describe what a Scholar class is like.
      a. What kinds of activities do you do in your academic/applied/Scholar classes?
   5) Do you have friends in the different pathways? …Why not?
   6) Do you think having streams creates social divides between students? Does it influence the cliques/who students socialize with?
      a. Do course pathways have an impact on the extracurriculars (i.e. teams, clubs, musical) at school?

3. **Students’ perceptions of themselves: How do they see themselves?**
   1) Tell me about your transition from 8th grade to high school? Who helped you to make your course selections for high school?
   2) Did your gr 8 teacher help? How did they help? What advice did they give you?
      a. Did you feel you were well-informed and had all the information you needed?
   3) How does it feel to be in the applied/academic/Scholar pathway?
      a. What do you think about being in the applied/academic/Scholar pathway?
   4) Tell me about yourself as a student.
      a. How does your course pathway influence how motivated you are in your classes?
   5) Did you change pathways after gr 9? Why/why not?
      a. Do you ever think about changing pathways? What prevents you from changing?
   6) Where do you think these classes are going to lead you after high school? Can you describe what that will look like?