

A NARRATIVE RESEARCH STUDY OF SELF-SELECTED TRACKING ON  
MOTIVATION IN 10TH GRADE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSES

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The practice of tracking has had longstanding negative impacts on students, especially students in lower academic tracks. This research suggests that tracking develops the themes of a narrative of deficit through inequality and exclusion and impedes student motivation due to the negative implications. A common finding of outside research studies was that of disapproval for the current school organizational structure of tracking due to the negative consequences on students. Furthermore, several research studies developed an outline of positive ways to advocate for a unifying system of educational change. Educational leaders should heed the suggestions of researchers to promote changes within the system to benefit marginalized students. Students' silenced narratives should be considered to promote voice within educational change.

The purpose of this narrative research is to explore motivation through the overt and covert narratives of 10th grade English Language Arts students, who self-select higher and lower academic tracks at a large, southeastern United States, public high school through a qualitative unstructured questionnaire. This study also observes 10th grade English Language Arts students' ability to discuss these issues.

Using information from a 10-question qualitative, unstructured questionnaire of twelve (12) research participants, this thesis explores the following questions: Research question one (RQ1): What are 10th grade English Language Arts students' attitudes towards higher and lower academic tracks?, Research question two (RQ2): What factors contribute to 10th grade English Language Arts students' motivation to self-select higher and lower academic tracks?

Dedicated To

My Mother

Who urged me to strive to achieve my  
biggest dreams in life

My Father

Who taught me to persevere and prepared me to face  
challenges with confidence and humility

My Family

Who offered encouragement  
and support in all my endeavors

My Mentors

Who enlightened me with wisdom  
and constant guidance

My Students

Who served as the source of inspiration  
for my passion in my work

God

Who gave me strength, power of mind, protection  
and a healthy life.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*“None of us—as an individual—can save the world as a whole, but... each of us must behave as though it were in our power to do so” (Havel, 1997, p. 112).*

Although a long-standing practice across the globe, controversy continues to surround the system of school organization in the form of ability grouping, specifically known as tracking, and its effects on motivation throughout students’ academic careers and beyond. Tracking, in which institutions and/or students select classes based on different levels (remedial, standard, honors, gifted, Advanced Placement, etc.), inadvertently alters students’ beliefs, specifically the beliefs in “how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave” (Bandura, Perceived self-efficacy in cognitive development and functioning, 1993, p. 118). Fundamentally, tracking impacts students’ beliefs about their own capabilities to attain high achievement and their level of motivation to do so. Moreover, tracking promotes the labeling process, which is defining or classifying an individual or group, and can lead to adverse stigmatization for students leading to low self-esteem, low expectations from parents and teachers, and embarrassment from peer groups, which also adversely effects motivational outcomes. While proponents of tracking support it as a method of targeted and individualized instruction due to the arranged nature of ability grouping in which high achieving students and low achieving students are divided and placed separately, the practice ultimately leads to divisive educational experiences which negatively impacts students’ level of motivation toward successes and challenges.

### Statement of Problem

Many of the complications of tracking, including low student motivation and achievement, derive from the profound presence of division and inequality throughout U.S. history regarding educational tracking. As societal policies have shaped educational perspectives throughout history, a clear division and notable difference between the demographic composition of honors- and standard-level students exists in part due to certain ideas, experiences, and attitudes. Because high achieving students and low achieving students are divided and placed separately, the practice ultimately leads to divisive educational experiences which negatively impacts students' level of motivation toward successes and challenges. Additional research needs to address how ideas, experiences, and attitudes shape the overt and covert narratives of secondary toward honors- and standard-level classes, and the way students discuss these topics.

### Purpose of Study

The purpose of this narrative research was to explore motivation through the overt and covert narratives of 10th grade English Language Arts students, who self-selected higher and lower academic tracks at a large, southeastern United States, public high school through a qualitative unstructured questionnaire. This study also observed 10th grade English Language Arts students' ability to discuss these issues.

### Significance of Study

Exploring the overt and covert narratives of secondary English Language Arts students toward honors- and standard-level classes will increase personal and professional understandings of how various factors impact the education system, as well as individual classrooms and

students. The decreased level of motivation within the secondary student population highlights the need for more effective system of educational organization and awareness in-service in teacher professional learning initiatives. Thus, teacher professional learning initiatives that recognize the overt and covert narratives of secondary English Language Arts students toward honors- and standard-level classes will be better able to equip teachers for entrance into the challenging classroom environment, in terms of both classroom management and teaching. In terms of research, the study helps to uncover critical areas in the educational process that remain unexplained. Thus, a new perspective on students' educational experiences and teacher awareness may be attained to improve instruction.

### Theoretical Perspectives

#### Social Conflict Theory

Examination of this complex issue between students and the school requires careful consideration of social conflict theory due to its inherent interest and critical analysis of conflict between individuals and groups from a sociological perspective. Consequently, it has recently been applied to the field of education regarding social inequality in schools based on the existence of:

1. a sphere of action or a set of issues which are the same for all the actors [...];
2. a principle of opposition according to which each is defined in relation to an opponent; and,
3. a principle of identity in which each party defines itself (Wieviorka, 2010, p. 3).

According to the foundational principles outlined by Karl Marx, for there to be conflict, there should be issues which impact those involved, at least two opposing concepts as defined by those



involved, and differing identities defined by those involved (Karl Marx on society and social change: With selections by Friedrich Engels, 1973). Social conflict theorists assert that schools reinforce and perpetuate divisions of class, gender, race, and ethnicity among students; and, therefore, negatively impact the academic self-concept of those students because of their inherent role as authorities over the weaker subordinates. Ultimately, “the way in which groups in opposition become stronger or weaker in the conflict” lends itself to the fact that students’ academic self-concept continues to weaken through a culture of division and deficit while the power of the schools to control and perpetuate inequalities continues to strengthen (Wieviorka, 2010, p. 4).

For this study, social conflict theory was applied to research regarding social inequality between individual students and the school as it relates to organization and tracking. Specifically, social conflict theorists

point to tracking, a formalized sorting system that places students on ‘tracks’ (advanced versus low achievers) that perpetuate inequalities. While [some] educators may believe that students do better in tracked classes because they are with students of similar ability and may have access to more individual attention from teachers, [social] conflict theorists feel that tracking leads to self-fulfilling prophecies in which students live up (or down) to teacher and societal expectations. (Strayer, Scaramuzzo, Griffiths, Keirns, & Cody-Rydzewski, 2015)

The self-fulfilling prophecy was defined by Robert K. Merton “a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true” (Merton, 1948). Therefore, this theory was crucial to the understanding and analysis of the purposes and functions of tracking within the organization of the school, and ultimately, its negative effects on students’ self-efficacy as motivational outcomes.

## Symbolic Interactionism Theory

Symbolic interactionism theory was essential to the critical analysis of common, everyday interactions between students and the school from a social psychological perspective. Hence, it has recently been applied to the field of education regarding how interactions, such as labeling and tracking, symbolize those in power and those not in power based on the premises that:

1. human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them;
2. the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows; and,
3. meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters (Blumer, 1986, p. 2).

According to these ideas, any significant meaning of physical objects, human beings, or institutions is created by humans based on the perception of such and are subject to interpretation and modification. Symbolic interactionists are “disposed to view human society in terms of structure or organization and to treat social action as an expression of such structure or organization” (Blumer, 1986, p. 87). Likewise, the school is a social system which has a unique culture, norms, and values that reflect that of the greater society, and thus, can be used to analyze human society and social action. Symbolic interactionists consider “education as one way that labeling theory is seen in action. A symbolic interactionist might say that this labeling has a direct correlation to those who are in power and those who are labeled” (Strayer, Scaramuzzo, Griffiths, Keirns, & Cody-Rydzewski, 2015). Essentially, students who are subject to exacting school organizational structures, such as tracking, face an implicit power struggle which ultimately impacts their motivation. For example, students who score particularly low on state or local standardized assessments are likely to be labeled “at-risk” or “low-achieving” based on the

interactions between the individual students and the school which further impacts their beliefs about their abilities to succeed and motivation to do so.

Specifically, symbolic interactionism impacts various aspects in human development, including the sense of self and identity development, and academics have extended the basic tenants of the theory to analyze how it impacts motivation. Because humans are social creatures, interpersonal interactions impact the perceptions of others, which then impacts the development of the self. Coined by the theorist Cooley, “the looking glass self” describes the method in which “people shap[e] themselves based on other people’s perception, which leads people to reinforce other people’s perspectives on themselves. People shape themselves based on what other people perceive and confirm other people’s opinion on themselves” (Strayer, Scaramuzzo, Griffiths, Keirns, & Cody-Rydzewski, 2015). Because others can have a significant impact on students’ perception of self, it is important to note that this aspect of symbolic interactionism can be used by individuals and institutions to label students and further impact students’ motivation. When students receive data and information from outside sources, such as the interactions with teachers, parents, and other students, they accept this into their self-schema which reinforces their beliefs, experiences, and generalizations about the self. For example, students who struggle with assessments and perform poorly are thus labeled as “low-achieving” by others (teachers, parents, and students) which alters the students’ perceived self-efficacy and motivation due to how the others interact with them based on these perceptions.

### Rationale for the Study

Research in educational tracking primarily examines its historical context (Oakes, Tracking in secondary schools: A contextual perspective, 1987; Reese, 1995; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Loveless, The tracking and ability grouping debate, 1998); philosophical or theoretical foundations; impetus, growth, and development (Karlson, 2015; Domina, et al., 2016); structural and cultural challenges (Callahan, 2005; Houtte, Demanet, & Stevens, 2012; Kelly & Carbonaro, 2012; Umansky, 2016; Stanley & Venzant Chambers, 2018); and policies and practices (Oakes, Tracking: Beliefs, practices, and consequences, 1987; Mayer, Lechasseur, & Donaldson, 2018). Research closely related to this study examine the overall effects of educational tracking programs on student self-efficacy and motivation. However, there is little evidence of research which examines the overt and covert narratives of 10th grade English Language Arts students attitudes toward higher and lower academic tracks, and the way students discuss these topics. More specifically, little research has been conducted regarding 10th grade English Language Arts students' motivation to select higher or lower tracks. Using information from a 10-question qualitative, unstructured questionnaire of twelve (12) research participants, this thesis explores the following questions: Research question one (RQ1): What are 10th grade English Language Arts students' attitudes towards higher and lower academic tracks?, Research question two (RQ2): What factors contribute to 10th grade English Language Arts students' motivation to self-select higher and lower academic tracks?

## Glossary of Terms

**Academic Track:** a set of possible course selections available to a specific group of students.

**Covert:** “contested stories [and] are part of an oppressed opposition, but also contain gossip and rumours” (Reissner, 2002, p. 7).

**Deficit Narrative:** refers to the notion that students (particularly low socioeconomic, minority students) fail in school because such students and their families experience deficiencies that obstruct the learning process.

**Educational Tracking:** institutions and/or students select classes based on different levels (remedial, standard, honors, gifted, Advanced Placement, etc.).

**Honors-level Class:** generally, refers to exclusive, higher-level classes that proceed at a faster pace and cover more material than standard classes.

**Inequality:** unequal distribution of academic resources, including but not limited to; school funding, qualified and experienced teachers, books, and technologies to socially excluded communities.

**Inequity:** unfair, avoidable differences arising from poor governance, corruption or cultural exclusion, including but not limited to; socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, gender or disability.

**Institutional Tracking:** schools deliberately assign students to higher or lower academic tracks

**Motivation:** defined through the lens of the self-efficacy theory; students have higher motivation when they have high assurance in their capabilities and follow through with meeting perceived challenges; students have lower motivation when they have low assurance in their capabilities and avoid perceived challenges (Bandura, Perceived self-efficacy in cognitive development and functioning, 1993).

**Narrative:** spoken or written account of connected events; a story.

**Overt:** “communicated openly to a wider public” (Reissner, 2002, p. 7).

**Self-Efficacy:** students’ beliefs, specifically the beliefs in “how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave” (Bandura, Perceived self-efficacy in cognitive development and functioning, 1993, p. 118).

**Self-Fulfilling Prophecy:** “a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true” (Merton, 1948).

**Self-Selected Tracking:** students have the equal opportunity to enroll in the academic track they prefer without prerequisites, like test scores or grades.

**Social Conflict:** reinforce and perpetuate divisions of class, gender, race, and ethnicity among students.

**Standard-level Class:** generally, lower-level classes that proceed at a slower pace and cover less material than honors classes.

The following chapter will describe the literature review and background information for the study. The chapter is organized in the following sections: defining motivation, defining tracking, the history of tracking in the United States, the relevance of tracking and motivation in the 21st century, possible influences of self-selected tracking on student motivation, disproportionate student demographics found in tracking systems, and developing a narrative of deficit through inequality and exclusion.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND BACKGROUND

*“School people must not fall into the trap of thinking that early preparation for an unjust world requires early exposure to injustice” (Oakes, Keeping track: How schools structure inequality, 1985, p. 205).*

This chapter defines motivation and tracking, and examines various historical events relating to development of tracking in the U.S. In addition, this chapter examines the possible influences of self-selected tracking. Furthermore, this chapter outlines the contemporary student demographic profiles in higher and lower academic tracks, as well as discusses topics such as the development of the deficit narrative. This research relates to the field of educational tracking experiences. Extensive research provides a strong foundation for a critical study of motivation and educational tracking.

### Defining Motivation

The complex concept of motivation has been defined by scholars in various contexts depending on field of study, but for the context of educational theory, motivation will be defined through the lens of the self-efficacy theory. According to Albert Bandura, efficacy theory, which helps to further explain educational motivation, asserts that:

A strong sense of efficacy enhances human accomplishment and personal well-being in many ways. People with high assurance in their capabilities approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided. Such an efficacious outlook fosters intrinsic interest and deep engrossment in activities. They set themselves challenging goals and maintain strong commitment to them. They heighten and sustain their efforts in the face of failure. They quickly recover their sense of efficacy after failures or setbacks. They attribute failure to insufficient effort or deficient knowledge and skills which are acquirable. They approach threatening situations with assurance that they can exercise control over them. Such an efficacious outlook produces personal accomplishments, reduces stress and lowers vulnerability to depression. (Perceived self-efficacy in cognitive development and functioning, 1993, p. 144)

According to seminal research completed by Albert Bandura, “self-efficacy beliefs affect thought patterns that may be self-aiding or self-hindering” (Bandura, Human agency in social cognitive theory, 1989, p. 1175). Self-efficacy in students can develop through mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological feedback and can be impacted either positively or negatively depending on those factors. Still, tracking can work to impede growth of self-efficacy in lower-track students due to recurrent negative experiences that result from lowered expectations of academic achievement that becomes internalized.

### Defining Tracking

While tracking encourages students with high perceived ability to continue to seek growth on a positive pathway in higher-level tracks, students with low perceived ability typically do not have equitable educational experiences due to their enrollment in lower-level classes with generally lower expectations for academic achievement and behavior. Specifically, students who doubt their capabilities shy away from difficult tasks which they view as personal threats. They have low aspirations and weak commitment to the goals they choose to pursue. When faced with difficult tasks, they dwell on their personal deficiencies, on the obstacles they will encounter, and all kinds of adverse outcomes rather than concentrate on how to perform successfully. (Bandura, Self-efficacy, 1994)

For example, students enrolled in standard-level classes, and therefore labeled as ‘standard’, naturally experience feelings of lowered self-esteem, lowered aspirations, and negative attitudes toward school, which directly impacts their sense of self and the development of their academic self-concept, or belief in oneself, and negatively impacts their motivation to perform well in the given course and thus their actual academic achievement (Oakes, Tracking: Beliefs, practices, and consequences, 1987, p. 18). In a classroom experience, students may deliberately express



feelings of apathy regarding proposed course content and required assignments because of these discouraging feelings and attitudes, which then negatively impacts teachers' perceptions of the students. This is a common occurrence which permeates through lower-level classes and ultimately impacts the students' educational experience, and in turn, begins a destructive cycle of low expectations and low achievement, leading to deficiencies in positive learning experiences and lowered self-efficacy. Furthermore, teachers and students may encounter misunderstandings due to lowered expectations, and thus, utilize incompatible styles of classroom management and instruction, often resulting in standard-level students experiencing difficulties with learning.

### The History of Tracking in the U.S.

To truly appreciate the relevance of such implications, it is important to further examine the history of school organization and tracking in the United States. To start, the mid-19th century brought about radical change from the customary one-room schoolhouse that was once the gathering place for learners of all ages. Yet, at this time, schools in the United States began to review and reassess the function of school itself to promote a more "centralized system" (Reese, 1995, p. 52). Thus, age restrictions were constructed to begin the initial organization of curriculum and instruction to introduce varying levels of schooling. Reformers argued for the creation of a "curriculum suitable for 'their age, and intellectual and moral wants' and in a general way oriented to [...] life plans" which began the development of the first hierarchical educational system introducing students to increasingly difficult topics throughout high school, resembling the current school organizational structure across the United States of hierarchy through higher and lower class levels, both academically and societally (Reese, 1995, p. 93).

Yet, at the time, as many students struggled to progress past the eighth grade, the newly adopted school system truly served only a small population of teenagers because of the high dropout rate (largely due to the need to work at a young age). Aside from this, high schools began administering entrance examinations, sequencing curriculum, building on previous years' instruction, and assessing students annually for advancement qualifications, and because of these new challenges, the number of students successfully progressing to complete high school remained low (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Consequently, as the best, brightest, and most privileged students progressed the process of “matching students and curriculum appeared to unfold naturally because each grade level itself was an ability group [...] Pupils who learned it graduated to the next grade level. Those who didn't stayed behind or left school altogether” (Loveless, The tracking and ability grouping debate, 1998). Although due to the unintended negative consequences of increased difficulty and sequencing in curriculum and instruction, this presented the first systematic tracking system in the United States in separating groups of students into high and low achieving in school, and therefore society.

To continue, the 20th century marked the rise of the student population across the country due to the demand for higher education and applicable skills in a flourishing workforce. To meet the demands of the increased and diversified student population, the school organizational structure was forced to shift away from pure grade-level attainment to a system which attempted to promote the success of all through the attainment of a high school diploma; however, this continued the development of tracking as “distinctions emanat[ed] from the track one belonged to within high school” (Loveless, The tracking and ability grouping debate, 1998). Meaning,

instead of tracking students regarding whether they attended high school, the growing student population was tracked within the school itself through higher-level and lower-level courses.

### The Relevance of Tracking and Motivation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

As the system of tracking developed throughout time, it has been charged with intense controversy concerning “the contention that ability grouping systems are inefficient and unfair, that they hinder learning and distribute learning inequitably” (Loveless, Making sense of the tracking and ability grouping debate, 1998). With this, aspects of school organization negatively affect students’ motivation through self-efficacy in secondary schools through the lens of social conflict theory and symbolic interactionism with the standpoint that schools continue to reinforce and perpetuate social inequalities with a direct correlation to those who are in power and those who are being labeled. Specifically, according to Bandura, tracking “diminish[es] the perceived self-efficacy of those cast in lower ranks” because they are placed a subordinate or lesser than their peers in higher-level classes which creates conflict between the two groups (Self-efficacy, 1994, p. 175). Furthermore, the natural inclination of classroom structures

[...] affect[s] the development of intellectual self-efficacy, in large part, by the relative emphasis they place on social comparison versus self-comparison appraisal. Self-appraisals of less able students suffer most when the whole group studies the same material and teachers make frequent comparative evaluations. (Bandura, Self-efficacy, 1994, p. 175)

Therefore, the symbolic messages perceived by students behind the division of higher-level classes and lower-level classes complicates the process of positive motivational development. In all, students suffer when divided through the school organization structure of tracking.

### Possible Influences of Self-Selected Tracking on Student Motivation

One common problem that occurs as a result of tracking is the impact of teachers, which in turn largely hinders the self-efficacy of students. Mayer, Lechasseur, and Donaldson (2018) conducted a quantitative research study of six districts located in the northeastern United States which observed 26 high school teachers teaching two English Language Arts classes of high and low tracks. The study found significant “meaningful differences in classroom quality across low and high-track classes taught by the same teacher... Students in the lowest track received less emotional, organizational, and instructional support than their peers in high-track classes taught by the same teacher” (Mayer, Lechasseur, & Donaldson, 2018). Essentially, the findings confirm that noteworthy problems arise in tracking regarding the quality of support provided by teachers to low-track students because of the differences in the labeling of students which results in lowered support and instruction for low-tracked students. According to the study, teacher support decreased in the teaching of low-track classes, which thus created problems of “inequalities in classroom experiences and further compound[ed] pre-existing inequalities in skills and achievement, [and] thereby structure[ed] inequitable student outcomes along tracks” (Mayer, Lechasseur, & Donaldson, 2018). Low teacher support systems, and thus low expectations, adversely impact the way students feel, think, and behave in a class, which impacts their motivation to perform well in class and negatively effects academic success and self-efficacy. When students consistently experience negative, inequitable classroom experiences, their self-efficacy decreases due to tracking. Conversely, high-tracked students experience enriched classrooms with more support from teachers which in turn positively effects academic success

and self-efficacy. Therefore, the practice of tracking across classes widens the gap between high- and low-tracked students due to opposing experiences and impacts the trajectory of their future.

In addition, Callahan (2005) conducted a quantitative research study of one high school located in the rural northern California which analyzed 355 high school English language learners to identify the significant predictors and the amount of variance in a given academic outcome. The study found that “placement proved to be significant in predicting [...] academic outcomes” and later discussed “as evidenced by the overall absence of placement in college-preparatory curricula across this sample, many English learners find themselves enrolled in low-track curricula with limited exposure to either the content or discourse necessary to enter into higher education” (Callahan, 2005, p. 321). Essentially, the results of this study confirmed that “tracking plays a much larger role than previously believed in predicting English learners’ academic achievement” (Callahan, 2005, p. 324). The scope of the study can be widened to generalize findings and support the notion that students who are enrolled in low-track classes also have limited exposure to the content or discourse necessary to mobilize into high-track classes, which effects their level of self-efficacy in facing challenges in difficult course content. When faced with challenges, low-track students are more likely to report adverse reactions to such because they were not previously prepared, and thus the cycle of low achievement continues to impact student self-efficacy. Based on these research studies, tracking clearly impacts both teachers and students, which creates a system of inequitable educational experiences that impact student self-efficacy negatively.

### Disproportionate Student Demographics found in Tracking Systems

Research confirms a trend of division between the demographics of higher and lower tracked classes. While the majority of the population of higher tracked classes is historically “higher class,” meaning White, affluent students, the population of lower tracked classes includes a “a greater proportion of minority and low-income students” (Hallinan, 1994, p. 80). The division of classes within the tracking system is critical because minority students and students from low socioeconomic families are at a greater societal disadvantage. Tracking reinforces and perpetuates the narrative of deficit through inequitable instructional experiences, which compounds already critical issues of socioeconomic and familial inequities.

So, why does the student population continue to be divided by status? Research points to the fact that privilege within society significantly contributes to the motivation of students to select higher level academic tracks. For the affluent student population of higher tracked classes, academic success is consistently represented positively in daily experiences; and, furthermore, has constantly reflected back from sources of power, such as teachers, family, and peers (Guess, 2006, p. 656). The higher tracked student population as a whole are at an innate advantage regarding reporting a positive schooling experience, due to the fact that, historically, the education system was created for and by this affluent population.

However, the lower-tracked student population does not report as having the same or similar experiences. Instead, lower-tracked students in the nation report as having a schooling experience in which division is consistently reflected back from sources of power. With this, a large percentage of the lower-track student population does not necessarily report having an especially positive schooling experience; therefore, there is a lack of diverse representation

within the higher-tracked student population because, historically, the education system has failed in adequately representing, educating, and appropriately mentoring the marginalized student population.

The consequences of the demographic differences between the higher-track student population and the lower-track student population are vast and varied. This contributes to that idea that the majority of the high-track student population, which has been consistently advantaged due to status throughout history, struggles to connect to a student population which has not been exposed to such advantages, namely the lower-track student population within schools. This creates disconnect between classes of students, which perpetuates the narrative of deficit for lower tracked students.

The lack of representation of marginalized students within the higher-tracked classes impacts the education system negatively due to the fact that the marginalized student population continues to be underserved due to the consequences division. Although U.S. society might not be able to immediately impact the numbers of marginalized students that enroll in higher tracked classes, teachers, families, and peers can influence students' motivation to do so. As division continues to impact the development of students' perspectives and attitudes, it perpetuates the idea of inequality and inequity within society. Schools must be willing to address certain weaknesses within the system of perpetuating these issues. Furthermore, it is helpful for schools to understand the overt and covert narratives of students regarding their ideas, experiences, and attitudes toward higher and lower track classes, which might impact their ability to create positive social change for marginalized communities of students.

## Developing a Narrative of Deficit through Inequality and Exclusion

### Deficit Theory

According to thorough research completed by Richard R. Valencia, deficit thinking is used in “the context of education - both in 1) the academic discourse as to what constitutes deficit thinking and 2) the schooling practices resultant of this social thought” and contextualizes the underlying reasons for such disparity between high- and low-track students regarding level of self-efficacy (The evolution of deficit thinking, 1997, p. x). Deficit thinking in students can be attributed to several factors, such as “alleged internal deficiencies (such as cognitive and/or motivational limitations) or shortcomings socially linked to the youngster - such as familial deficits and dysfunctions” (Valencia, 1997, p. xi). However, systemic factors, such as curriculum differentiation through tracking should be held equally responsible for such narratives of deficit observed in lower-track students due to the strenuous differences in curriculum, instruction, and expectations.

### Inequity Theory

#### Instructional Inequity

Umansky (2016) conducted a quantitative research study using longitudinal administrative data from a large urban school district in California which analyzed student course-taking panel data over a 10-year period spanning from fall 2002 to spring 2012 with 42,790 individual students and 189,013 student-semester observations in Grades 6–8 to determine the causes of limited English learners’ limited access to academic courses. The study concluded that the process of tracking “undermines students’ strengths and exacerbates their



vulnerabilities. One of the key ways in which [English learners'] opportunities are limited in school is stratification in course access” (Umansky, 2016, p. 1826). This is a problem that pervades low-track classes, regardless of English learner membership, because low-track classes typically limit access to enriching academic experiences, which negatively impacts both teacher and student perceptions of the class.

When the educational system undermines students' strengths through tracking, the students are less motivated to achieve success and their self-efficacy is lowered because of negative perceptions. This decreases the mobility, or the direction of change in track assignments over students' four-year high school careers, between low-track and high-track classes as found in this study. The study concluded that “addressing these barriers and inequities and implementing policies and practices to ensure [students] equitable access to content is of urgent importance” because it further widens the achievement gap between high- and low-track students (Umansky, 2016, p. 1826).

Domina, T., McEachin, A., Hanselman, P., Agarwal, P., Hwang, N., and Lewis, R. (2016) conducted a quantitative research study to use “administrative data from 24,000 8th graders in 23 ethnically- and economically-diverse California public middle schools to measure the dimensions of school tracking systems and study their relation to student academic skills development” and the findings “point to a frequently overlooked way in which schools and their organizational processes shape student achievement and achievement inequality” (Domina, et al., 2016, pp. 3, 35). Essentially, this study asserted that tracking promotes the deficit narrative in student educational experiences because it sponsors inequality between high- and low-track students. In particular, the data described that “that when schools group students into ELA

classes based on their prior achievement, high-achieving students tend to experience rapid test score growth in ELA while low-achieving students fall behind” (Domina, et al., 2016, p. 34). This shows the inequality and exclusion that permeates throughout secondary classes that are divided by the system of tracking. Low-achieving students, and thus low-tracked students, are disenfranchised by the divisive nature of tracking and continue to fall behind academically and even socially.

Carbonaro and Kelly (2012) conducted a quantitative research study to “examine how students’ high school track placements affect teacher expectations regarding students’ educational attainment in the NELS data” from the graduating class of 1992 (Curriculum tracking and teacher expectations: Evidence from discrepant course taking models, p. 271).

According to the results:

For both teachers and students, track level exerts a strong effect on expectations of college attendance. For students, the percentage reporting expected college attendance increases from 74.8 % in the regular track to 96.4 % in the high track, for teachers, from 40.4 to 90.1 %. Finally, tracking seems to affect teacher expectations even among students who say they expect to attend college. For example, over half of the low-track teachers expect the same students who say they will attend college not to attend college (52.3 %), but it is much less common for academic or advanced track teachers to not think such students will attend college (Kelly & Carbonaro, 2012, p. 282).

This research suggests that tracking develops the themes of a narrative of deficit through inequality and exclusion and impedes growth of student self-efficacy due to the negative implications.

### Socioeconomic Inequity

Also, Karlson (2015) conducted a quantitative research study by applying a difference-in-differences (DID) approach to eighth- and tenth-grade cohorts in the Public Use Version of the

National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 which “provide[d] longitudinal information on adolescents’ educational expectations and tracking experiences both before (eighth grade) and after (tenth grade) adolescents are tracked in high school” for a total of 17,184 adolescents (Expectations on track? High school tracking and adolescent educational expectations). The findings resulted in the assertion that “tracking in high schools is likely to reinforce preexisting socioeconomic inequalities in educational expectations and consequent educational attainment” which inevitably lead to narratives of deficit in student experiences (Karlson, 2015). This avows the continued interpretation of the thematic messages which are detrimental to student experiences in tracking.

### Familial Inequity

The theme of developing a narrative of deficit through inequality and exclusion is displayed in a study by Houtte, Demanet, and Stevens (2012) which was “based on a subsample of the Flemish Educational Assessment, gathered in 2004– 2005, encompassing 10 multilateral and 56 categorial schools with 3,758 academic and 2,152 vocational students” (Self-esteem of academic and vocational students: Does within school tracking sharpen the difference?, p. 73). The purpose of this study was to determine the differences between self-esteem in academic students versus vocational students. The results yielded that students in the academic track have higher self-esteem than vocational students.

The following chapter will describe the methodology utilized for this research study. Following a review of the purpose statement, the chapter is organized in the following sections:

methodological framework, research questions, researcher's role, research setting, research participants, limitations of the study, ethical considerations, data collection, and data analysis.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

*“One theory in educational research holds that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world. This general concept is refined into the view that education and educational research is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; learners, teachers, and researchers are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2).*

This chapter describes the methodology utilized for this research study. Following an explanation of the methodological framework, the chapter is organized in the following sections: research questions, researcher’s role, research setting, research participants, limitations of the study, ethical considerations, data collection, and data analysis.

The purpose of this narrative research was to explore motivation through the overt and covert narratives of 10th grade English Language Arts students, who self-selected higher and lower academic tracks at a large, southeastern United States, public high school through a qualitative unstructured questionnaire. This study also described 10th grade English Language Arts students’ ability to discuss these issues.

### Methodological Framework

#### Qualitative Research

Qualitative research seeks to understand interpretations of lived experiences, including the behavior, perspectives, and feelings through the focus of culture and customs, social processes and interaction, and other experiences (Flick, 2009). Through the emergence of the limitations of quantitative research methods, qualitative research has filled the void to provide analysis of lived experiences through the return to the oral traditions, the return to the particular,

the return to the local, and the return to the timely (Flick, 2009, p. 21). Furthermore, qualitative research methods are marked by the importance of the natural setting of the participants, the descriptive analysis of responses and observations, the process-oriented inductive focus, and the meaningful understandings of such research (Bogdan & Bilken, 2003).

Qualitative research studies designed to better explicate participants' perspectives through the analysis of interviews, case studies, focus groups, observations, and records. Qualitative researchers in education can continually be found asking questions of the people they seek to learn from to discover "what they are experiencing, how they interpret their experiences, and how they themselves structure the social world in which they live" (Psathas, 1973, p. 27). The research questions asked in this study were: what are 10th grade English Language Arts students' attitudes towards higher and lower academic tracks and what factors contribute to 10th grade English Language Arts students' motivation to self-select higher and lower academic tracks?

### Narrative Inquiry

A narrative study is a study of "the ways humans experience the world" because "humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Narrative inquiry sheds light to the lived experiences of individuals through voice, including both overt and covert narratives. For the purpose of this study, overt will refer to "communicated openly to a wider public" and covert will refer to "contested stories [and] are part of an oppressed opposition, but also contain gossip and rumours" (Reissner, 2002, p. 7). Notably, "people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas

narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). The focus of narrative research can be on the experiences of one or more individuals. The process is one of telling and retelling stories in a mutual connection for a significant purpose of inquiry. However, there are complexities in expressing multiple narratives, specifically “at one level it is the personal narratives and the jointly shared and constructed narratives that are told in the research writing, but narrative researchers are compelled to move beyond the telling of the lived story to tell the research story” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 10). The delicate balance of representing multiple perspectives is essential to maintain to ensure that the voices of both narratives are understood by the audience.

As it relates to educational research,

one part of the agenda is to let experience and time work their way in inquiry. Story, being inherently temporal, requires this. By listening to participant stories of their experience of teaching and learning, we hope to write narratives of what it means to educate and be educated. These inquiries need to be soft, or perhaps gentle is a better term. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 12)

It is the desire of educational researchers who utilize narrative inquiry to explore diverse experiences within the context of the school system to understand the foundations of individual perspectives and perhaps draw on such to enact positive change. Understanding what it means to educate and be educated in the complex system of educational tracking and the factors that motivate students to self-select higher and lower tracks is of utmost importance to determine areas for change to silence the narrative of deficit being perpetuated in modern times.

### Research Questions

The researcher explored motivation through the overt and covert narratives of 10th grade English Language Arts students, who self-selected higher and lower academic tracks at a large, southeastern, public high school through a qualitative unstructured questionnaire. This study also observed 10th grade English Language Arts students' ability to discuss these issues. Research was conducted by narrative analysis utilizing the results of a qualitative, unstructured questionnaire:

**Research question one (RQ1):** What are 10th grade English Language Arts students' attitudes towards higher and lower academic tracks?

**Research question two (RQ2):** What factors contribute to 10th grade English Language Arts students' motivation to self-select higher and lower academic tracks?

### Researcher's Role

The role of the researcher was important because the researcher was considered an instrument in data collection, meaning that the researcher played a role in the way data is collected and analyzed. The researcher was considered an insider into the phenomenon which the study seeks to describe regarding educational tracking. This may have influenced the responses of research participants.

### Research Setting

Questionnaires were conducted in-person and recorded in a quiet, neutral location where the research participants were not in danger and where the research participants felt was a private



atmosphere. No other people, other than the researcher and the research participants, were present during the time of the session.

### Research Participants

Research participants included twelve (12) students who were selected from a sample of convenience of students who were at least 14 years of age and under age 18, who were known to the researcher as current student enrolled in 10th grade English Language Arts classes at a large, southeastern United States, public high school. Students were not selected based on other identifiers, such as gender, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity. There were no other exclusion criteria. Research participants were contacted by the researcher in person to complete a ten-question questionnaire that took approximately 30 minutes. There were no questions that made the research participants unwilling or uncomfortable to participate, which created an atmosphere that allowed them to respond freely. If the research participant was unwilling or uncomfortable, they may have chosen to decline answering questions.

The researcher analyzed the responses of twelve (12) research participants. Small participant research, also known as Small-N research design, is the expected norm in qualitative research (Creswell, 2009). Small studies with a limited number of research participants enabled the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of participant experience.

The researcher collected qualitative and quantitative data from Spring 2019 in two English Language Arts classes: English Language Arts Honors and English Language Arts Standard using an unstructured questionnaire and the EdInsight Instructional Management System, which is “an advanced, ‘push’ model data analysis tool. It provides comprehensive,

relevant, up-to-date information to individual teachers, principals, and administrators via an intuitive web-based interface” (OnHand Schools, Inc.). The EdInsight Instructional Management System includes several terms that are necessary to understand the accompanying identifiers of the research participants.

**Risk Percentile in School:** “The factors used to determine the At-Risk score are configured by the district. Percentile scores allow you to compare one student's scores with a group of students. In other words, if the student has an At Risk percentile score of 50 they are exactly in the middle of the group of students measured” (OnHand Schools, Inc.).

**Risk Score:** “The factors used to determine the At-Risk score are configured by the district. Student data are aggregated to form a predictive analytic risk score configuration, comprised of indicators that flag a student at risk of graduation (attendance, misconduct, course failure, mobility, grade point average, overage, and retention). To identify at-risk students in compliance with 1001.42, F.S., schools utilize an early warning identification report. This report specifically identifies students who meet two or more at-risk indicators (attendance below 90 percent, one or more in school or out of school suspensions, course failure in English Language Arts or Mathematics, and Level 1 score on statewide, standardized assessments in English Language Arts or Mathematics)” (Seminole County Public Schools, 2018-2019).

**Exceptional Student Education (ESE):** “The purpose of ESE is to help each child with a disability progress in school and prepare for life after school. ESE services include specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of the child” (Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services (BEESS), 2011)

**Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD):** “A specific learning disability is defined as a disorder in one or more of the basic learning processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest in significant difficulties affecting the ability to listen, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematics” (Florida Department of Education, 2019).

**English Language Learner (ELL):** “An ELL student is one who was not born in the U.S. and whose native language is other than English; or was born in the U.S. but who comes from a home in which a language other than English is most relied upon for communication; or is an American Indian or Alaskan Native and comes from a home in which a language other than English has had a significant impact on his or her level of English language proficiency; and who as a result of the above has sufficient difficulty speaking, reading, writing or understanding the English language to deny him or her the opportunity to learn successfully in classrooms in which the language of instruction is English” (Florida Department of Education, 2014-2015).

**Economically (Ec.) Disadvantaged:** “Economically disadvantaged students are students determined to be eligible for free and reduced price meals under the National School Lunch Program” (Florida Department of Education, 2014-2015).

**Section 504 (504):** “an individual with a disability is defined as any person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity. Major life activities include caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning and working” (Florida Department of Education).

**High School (HS) Transition Program:** “Recommended 8th grade students who are at risk of not meeting promotion to 9th grade and demonstrate the need for high school readiness support may be invited to enroll in a unique educational experience at high school. The Transition

Program allows students the opportunity to participate in a high school environment while earning a high school credit. Academic readiness for high school is the priority. Students successfully completing the Transition Program shall be promoted to the 9th grade, earn one high school elective credit, and be eligible to participate in extracurricular sports and activities the first nine weeks in high school” (Seminole County Public Schools, 2018-2019)

**Advanced Opportunities:** “Students that are identified as Advanced Opportunity students are placed in at least one advanced class to help them prepare for college and advanced coursework in high school” (Seminole County Public Schools, 2018-2019).

The unstructured questionnaires were collected from a small sample population of research participants that were enrolled in 10th grade English Language Arts classes. Based on the current 10th grade English Language Arts enrollment reported, participant responses were grouped and reported in the following categories: Of the 12 participants, six (50%) were enrolled in English Language Arts Honors and six (50%) were enrolled in English Language Arts Standard. Table 1 and Table 2 provide a summary of research participant information and are categorized by current academic track level.

Table 1: Summary of Research Participant Information for Current 10th Grade English Language Arts Honors Classes

Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Risk Percentile in School/ Risk Score	ESE	ELL	Ec. Disadvantaged	504	HS Transition Program	Advanced Opportunities
Julia	Female	White/Non-Hispanic	36.0%/22	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
James	Male	White/Hispanic	84.0%/79	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Bob	Male	White/Hispanic	0.0%/0	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Brittney	Female	Black/Non-Hispanic	36.0%/27	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Billy	Male	White/Non-Hispanic	34.0%/15	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Emily	Female	White/Non-Hispanic	68.0%/52	No	No	No	No	Yes	No

As shown in Table 1, of the six participants enrolled in English Language Arts Honors, three (50.0%) identified as male and three (50.0%) identified as female. Furthermore, the race/ethnicity reported were identified as three (50.0%) White/Non-Hispanic, two (33.3%) White/Hispanic, and one (16.7%) Black/Non-Hispanic. The mean Risk Percentile in School was calculated as 43.0%. The mean Risk Score was calculated as 28.0 points. Zero (0.0%) participants were identified under Exceptional Student Education (ESE). Zero (0.0%) participants were identified as English Language Learners (ELL). Two (33.3%) participants were identified as Economically Disadvantaged. One (16.7%) participant was identified as having a Section 504 accommodation plan. One (16.6%) participant participated in the High School (HS) Transition Program. Three (50.0%) participants were identified as Advanced Opportunities.

Table 2: Summary of Research Participant Information for Current 10th Grade English Language Arts Classes

Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Risk Percentile in School/ Risk Score	ESE	ELL	Ec. Disadvantaged	504	HS Transition Program	Advanced Opportunities
Theo	Female	White/Non-Hispanic	0.0%/0	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Jean	Male	White/Non-Hispanic	46.0%/20	Specific Learning Disabled	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Milton	Male	White/Hispanic	71.0%/62	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Dunkin	Male	White/Hispanic	41.0%/16	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Angel	Female	White/Non-Hispanic	97.0%/203	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Dia	Female	White/Non-Hispanic	38.0%/14	No	No	No	No	No	No

As shown in Table 2, of the six participants enrolled in English Language Arts Standard, three (50.0%) identified as male and three (50.0%) identified as female. Furthermore, the race/ethnicity reported were identified as four (66.7%) White/Non-Hispanic and two (33.3%) White/Hispanic. The mean Risk Percentile in School was calculated as 48.0%. The mean Risk Score was calculated as 52.5 points. One (16.7%) participant was identified under Exceptional Student Education (ESE) as Specific Learning Disabled. Zero (0.0%) participants were identified as English Language Learners (ELL). Five (83.3%) participants were identified as Economically Disadvantaged. Zero (0.0%) participants were identified as having a Section 504 accommodation plan. Zero (0.0%) participants participated in the High School (HS) Transition Program. Four (66.7%) participants were identified as Advanced Opportunities.

### Limitations of the Study

This study was limited in scope. This study was based on a limited number of research participants. The sample consisted of a limited number, exactly twelve (12), individuals who were enrolled in the 10th grade English Language Arts class at a public high school located in Central Florida. The first limitation concerns the limited number of research participants, as well as the requirement that they were enrolled in English Language Arts. The second limitation concerns that this study included only high school student sample populations, which excluded middle school and elementary school student sample populations. The third limitation concerns that the research site was not representative of a Title I community. This sample size is not generalizable because it is not representative of its community. Furthermore, students' narratives are not representative of all standard- or honors-level classes.

### Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the University of Central Florida's Institutional Review Board (IRB). (See Appendix A for the University IRB Approval Letter).

This study was approved by the School District's Institutional Review Board (IRB). (See Appendix B for the District IRB Approval Letter).

Participants completed HRP-502b – Informed Consent-Parent for Child. (See Appendix C for the Sample Consent Form).

### Research Participant Privacy

Participation in this study and responses were kept confidential. Any reference to the research participants within the published research were by pseudonym, including all direct

quotes from responses. All necessary subject identifiers from data files were removed. Data files stored electronically were encrypted on a password protected computer, which only the researcher had access to. Written notes and physical information were stored in a physically separate and secure location from the electronic data files and associated with the data files through a key code that is also stored in a separate and secure location. Only the researcher and the research supervisor might know who participated in this study. Five years after the completion of this research study all personally identifying information will be destroyed.

#### Risks to the Research Participant

The expected risks were minimal and did not exceed those found in everyday life. There were no expected risks for participating in this study.

#### Benefits to the Research Participant

There were no direct benefits to the research participant regarding participation in this study beyond the general knowledge that they are assisting in furthering the knowledge related to this research topic and assisting the researcher in completing the graduate thesis requirements. There was no compensation associated with participation in this study.

#### Data Collection

Data collection included an unstructured questionnaire format of ten (10) items that took approximately 30 minutes. Questionnaires were conducted in-person. The nature of the questionnaire required interpretation and analysis throughout the session, as well as after.



## Instrumentation

Questionnaire items were created based on prior research, an intensive literature review, and the purpose of the study. Each questionnaire item correlated to the study's research questions, listed under the section "Research Questions." Each questionnaire item was different and aided in the analysis of each of the research questions, labeled as (RQ#).

Questionnaire items one through four were meant to gather information about the research participant's background information, including name, academic year, current English Language Arts enrollment, racial identity, socioeconomic status, and plans for future English Language Arts enrollment. This information was significant to the study in order to make special correlations between the research participant's background information and the remaining responses.

Questionnaire item number five gathered information regarding the research participant's personal experiences in honors-level English Language Arts classes, as well as their feelings towards those experiences, and what they learned from such experiences. Questionnaire item number five correlated to (RQ1).

Questionnaire item number six gathered information regarding the research participant's attitudes toward standard-level English Language Arts classes and honors-level English Language Arts, as well as the factors that contributed to the research participant's beliefs. Furthermore, questionnaire item number six indirectly gathered information regarding how research participants engaged in self-selected tracking. Questionnaire item number six correlated to (RQ1).

Questionnaire item number seven gathered information regarding the research participant's attitudes and concerns about enrolling in standard-level English Language Arts classes versus honors-level English Language Arts classes. Questionnaire item number seven correlated to (RQ1).

Questionnaire item number eight gathered information regarding the research participant's thoughts about perceived differences in relationships with teachers who teach standard- or honors-level English Language Arts classes. Questionnaire item number eight correlated to (RQ2).

Questionnaire item number nine gathered information regarding the research participant's perception of their own identity as well as the impact that the level of English Language Arts enrollment has on their identity from the perspective of peers and adults. Questionnaire item number nine correlated to (RQ2).

Questionnaire item number ten gathered information regarding the research participant's preparedness in succeeding in standards-level or honors-level English Language Arts classes, considering their current experiences. Questionnaire item number ten correlated to (RQ2).

(See Appendix D for the Sample Unstructured Questionnaire).

### Protocol

The questionnaire protocol was utilized for data collection and data analysis. The questionnaire protocol utilized for this study consisted of ten (10) unstructured items. The results from the questionnaire protocol are evaluated and summarized in Chapter Four.

### Data Analysis

Due to the nature of unstructured questionnaires, the research participants often offered varying responses. This may have caused data to become skewed, or difficult to analyze due to the complexities offered with each response. However, the researcher preferred unstructured questionnaire items, with the possibility of varying responses, rather than alternative methods, because the topic of motivation and beliefs were quite complex. There was a large possibility that each research participant had a unique response to any given questionnaire item.

The researcher collected and analyzed emerging data in this study with the primary intent of developing themes from the data. After initial reading and rereading of the questionnaire responses, the researcher processed the data through manual coding to categorize information into themes for interpretation and analysis. This included identifying and placing emerging data, themes, and ideas into groups for use in this study. Significant data, themes, and ideas correlated directly to research questions. Furthermore, the research participant's direct words were used to illustrate significant data, themes, and ideas. Specific groups of data, themes, and ideas were developed into a descriptive narrative. The researcher interpreted and analyzed this to determine meanings and implications for 10th grade English Language Arts students, as well as the education system.

The following chapter will present a summary of the results of the study. The results will be presented in various categories, in which each category is explained in order to ensure that only pertinent results which are necessary for analyzing each research question are included.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

*“The ambition is to shatter grade narrative into many small stories and to problematize any linear mono-voiced grand narrative of the past by replacing it with an open polysemous (many meanings) and multivocal (many-voiced) web of little stories. Not everyone wants grand narratives banished, which gives the tension between dominant or grand narrative, and the ante-narrating of little stories”* (Boje, 2001, p. 10).

This chapter presents the results of the study. The results were coded and divided into two (2) categories by each of the correlating research questions (RQ#). Each category is explained, and the results are presented in order to ensure that only pertinent results which are necessary for analyzing each research question are included.

Research participants included twelve (12) students who were selected from a sample of convenience of students who were at least 14 years of age and under age 18, who were known to the researcher as current students enrolled in 10th grade English Language Arts classes at a large, southeastern United States, public high school. In order to protect participants’ identity, pseudonyms were selected (by researcher and participant). Further, identifying characteristics such as location or grade level were only to be used if relevant to the discussion or to distinguish one participant from another.

### Profile of Research Participants

Questionnaire items one through four were meant to gather information about the research participant’s background information, including name, academic year, current English Language Arts enrollment, racial identity, socioeconomic status, and plans for future English Language Arts enrollment. This information was significant to the study in order to make special correlations between the research participant’s background information and the remaining

questionnaire responses. Participant demographic and background information follows, with a brief profile of each participant.

### Current 10<sup>th</sup> Grade English Language Arts Honors Classes

#### Julia

Julia was a current 10th grade English Language Arts Honors student, who identified as a white/non-Hispanic female. She was previously enrolled in 9th grade English Language Arts Honors and plans to enroll in 11th grade Advanced Placement Language and Composition. Her Risk Percentile in School was 36.0% and Risk Score was 22 because of absences (6-25 days) and Quarter grades. She was not identified by the institution as ESE or ELL and did not participate in the HS Transition Program. Furthermore, she was not identified as Economically Disadvantaged or Advanced Opportunities. However, she did have a section 504 Accommodation plan for Flexible Scheduling (Extended Time), in which she may be provided extended time to complete a given test session. Also, she described her family's socioeconomic status as "middle class" and stated that her parents' highest level of education was a bachelor's degree.

#### James

James was a current 10th grade English Language Arts Honors student, who identified as a white/Hispanic male. He was previously enrolled in 9th grade English Language Arts Honors and plans to enroll in 11th grade Advanced Placement Language and Composition because he "would like to enroll in rigorous courses such as AP and honors to be further noticed by colleges." His Risk Percentile in School was 84.0% and Risk Score was 79 because of Quarter

grades and previous year course failures. He was not identified as ESE or ELL and did not participate in the HS Transition Program. He did not have a section 504 Accommodation plan. However, he was identified as Economically Disadvantaged and Advanced Opportunities. Also, he described his family's socioeconomic status as "upper low class" and stated that his "dad has earned his doctorate in law and [his] mom has her high school diploma."

### Bob

Bob was a current 10th grade English Language Arts Honors student, who identified as a white/Hispanic male. He was previously enrolled in 9th grade English Language Arts Honors and plans to enroll in 11th grade Advanced Placement Language and Composition. His Risk Percentile in School was 0.0% and Risk Score was 0. He was not identified as ESE, ELL, or Economically Disadvantaged, and did not participate in the HS Transition Program. Furthermore, he did not have a section 504 Accommodation plan. However, he was identified as Advanced Opportunities. He described his family's socioeconomic status as "upper middle class" and stated that his parents' highest level of education was a bachelor's degree.

### Brittney

Brittney was a current 10th grade English Language Arts Honors student, who identified as a black/non-Hispanic female. She was previously enrolled in 9th grade English Language Arts Honors and plans to enroll in 11th grade Advanced Placement Language and Composition. Regarding her plans for future English Language Arts enrollment, she shared,

I chose this course [Advanced Placement Language and Composition] because I have had very good grades in my English classes throughout high school. I also have had a very motivational and supportive system inside and outside of school and they encourage me

to work hard and take any great opportunities that come my way. I really enjoy learning about new topics and material. By enrolling in AP Lang next year, I hope to strengthen my education and become more prepared for college. The reason I chose Honors and AP over standard is because I feel like I won't be challenged enough in a standard class.

Brittney's Risk Percentile in School was 36.0% and Risk Score was 27 because of absences (6-25 days) and Quarter grades. She was not identified as ESE, ELL, or Economically Disadvantaged, and did not participate in the HS Transition Program. Furthermore, she did not have a section 504 Accommodation plan. However, she was identified as Advanced Opportunities. Also, she described her family's socioeconomic status as "middle class" and stated that her parents' highest level of education was a bachelor's degree.

### Billy

Billy was a current 10th grade English Language Arts Honors student, who identified as a white/non-Hispanic male. He was previously enrolled in 9th grade English Language Arts Honors and plans to enroll in 11th grade English Language Arts Honors because "English is a really easy class" and he feels "that there would be no reason to take standard." His Risk Percentile in School was 34.0% and Risk Score was 15 because of Quarter grades. He was not identified as ESE, ELL, and did not participate in the HS Transition Program. Furthermore, he did not have a section 504 Accommodation plan. However, he was identified as Economically Disadvantaged and Advanced Opportunities. He described his family's socioeconomic status as "slightly above the middle class but not yet in the upper class" and stated that his parents' highest level of education was an "associates I think, I can't remember."

### Emily

Emily was a current 10th grade English Language Arts Honors student, who identified as a white/non-Hispanic female. She was previously enrolled in 9th grade English Language Arts Standard and plans to enroll in 11th grade English Language Arts Honors because she took “English honors this year and liked it more than standard.” Her Risk Percentile in School was 68.0% and Risk Score was 52 because of absences (5+ days) and Quarter grades. She was not identified as ESE, ELL, Economically Disadvantaged, or Advanced Opportunities. Furthermore, she did not have a section 504 Accommodation plan. However, she did participate in the HS Transition Program. Also, she described her family’s socioeconomic status as “middle class” and stated that her parents’ highest level of education was a high school diploma.

### Current 10<sup>th</sup> Grade English Language Arts Standard Classes

### Theo

Theo was a current 10th grade English Language Arts Standard student, who identified as a white/non-Hispanic female. She was previously enrolled in 9th grade English Language Arts Standard and plans to enroll in 11th grade Advanced Placement Language and Composition. Her Risk Percentile in School was 0.0% and Risk Score was 0. She was not identified as ESE or ELL. Furthermore, she did not have a section 504 Accommodation plan or participate in the HS Transition Program. However, she was identified as Economically Disadvantaged and Advanced Opportunities. Also, she described her family’s socioeconomic status as “lower class” and stated that her mother’s highest level of education was a bachelor’s degree and her father’s highest level of education was an associate degree.



### Jean

Jean was a current 10th grade English Language Arts Standard student, who identified as a white/non-Hispanic male. He was previously enrolled in 9th grade English Language Arts Standard and plans to enroll in 11th grade English Language Arts Honors. His Risk Percentile in School was 46.0% and Risk Score was 20 because of Prior Retention. He was not identified as ELL. Furthermore, he did not have a section 504 Accommodation plan or participate in the HS Transition Program. However, he was identified as Specific Learning Disabled, Economically Disadvantaged, and Advanced Opportunities. Also, he described his family's socioeconomic status as "middle class" and stated that his parents' highest level of education was a high school diploma.

### Milton

Milton was a current 10th grade English Language Arts Standard student, who identified as a white/Hispanic male. He was previously enrolled in 9th grade English Language Arts Honors and plans to enroll in 11th grade English Language Arts Standard because "I don't want to stress to have to get good grades so I am taking easy classes to get good grades so I can please my grades and my parents." His Risk Percentile in School was 71.0% and Risk Score was 62 because Quarter grades and cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA). He was not identified as ESE or ELL. Furthermore, he did not have a section 504 Accommodation plan or participate in the HS Transition Program. However, he was identified as Economically Disadvantaged and Advanced Opportunities. Also, he described his family's socioeconomic status as "above average I would say. We can afford that we need, but not everything we want." He stated that

“my mom is still currently in college but is a licensed respiratory therapist, as well as a licensed nurse, while my dad has an Information Technology (IT) and a business degree.”

### Dunkin

Dunkin was a current 10th grade English Language Arts Standard student, who identified as a white/Hispanic male. He was previously enrolled in 9th grade English Language Arts Standard and plans to enroll in 11th grade Advanced Placement Language and Composition because he “figured it would be a better challenge and look good for college.” His Risk Percentile in School was 41.0% and Risk Score was 16 because of Quarter grades. He was not identified as ESE or ELL. Furthermore, he did not have a section 504 Accommodation plan or participate in the HS Transition Program. However, he was identified as Economically Disadvantaged and Advanced Opportunities. Also, he described his family’s socioeconomic status as “in the middle-class range” and stated that his father’s highest level of education was high school and mother “went to college but did not finish.”

### Angel

Angel was a current 10th grade English Language Arts Standard student, who identified as a white/non-Hispanic female. She was previously enrolled in 9th grade English Language Arts Honors and plans to enroll in 11th grade English Language Arts Honors because “I want to try to do better next year.” Her Risk Percentile in School was 97.0% and Risk Score was 203 because absences (5+ days), Quarter grades, previous year course failures, and cumulative GPA. She was not identified as ESE, ELL, or Advanced Opportunities. Furthermore, she did not have a section 504 Accommodation plan or participate in the HS Transition Program. However, she was

identified as Economically Disadvantaged. Also, she described his family's socioeconomic status as "middle class" and stated that her "mom didn't finish high school and dad went to some college."

### Dia

Dia was a current 10th grade English Language Arts Standard student, who identified as a white/non-Hispanic female. She was previously enrolled in 9th grade English Language Arts Standard and plans to enroll in 11th grade English Language Arts Honors because "I'm smart enough to do it but I don't like that the class is a bit of a sped up course because I already don't like doing the small amount of work I do." Her Risk Percentile in School was 38.0% and Risk Score was 14 because of Quarter grades. She was not identified as ESE, ELL, Economically Disadvantaged, or Advanced Opportunities. Furthermore, she did not have a section 504 Accommodation plan or participate in the HS Transition Program. Also, she described his family's socioeconomic status as "middle class" and stated that her parents' highest level of education was a master's degree and bachelor's degree.

### Research Question #1 (RQ1)

Research question one (RQ1) explored 10th grade English Language Arts students' attitudes towards higher and lower academic tracks. Questionnaire items number five, six, and seven gathered information regarding the research participants' personal experiences with, and attitudes and concerns towards honors- and standard-level English Language Arts classes. In order to determine attitudes toward higher and lower academic tracks, the researcher coded the responses of questionnaire items number five, six, and seven.

## Current 10<sup>th</sup> Grade English Language Arts Honors Classes

### Questionnaire Item Five

In response to questionnaire item number five, five (83.3%) honors-level research participants responded that they did have prior experience with taking honors-level English Language Arts classes. One (16.7%) honors-level research participant responded that they did not have prior experience with taking honors-level English Language Arts classes. Of the five that did have prior experience with honors-level English Language Arts classes, one (16.7%) participant reported that he received an F (lower than 60%) in the course and had earned credit recovery during summer school. Furthermore, six (100%) of the participants responded favorably to their experiences in honors-level English Language Arts classes. When responding to what they learned from these experiences, each response varied. Specifically, Julia stated that “I have only taken Honors English and each English class I’ve taken have been relatively easy.” Conversely, James stated that

I had an experience with failure in my 9th grade English [Language Arts] Honors class. I am disappointed that I had failed the class, but I went to summer school to make up credit and I find motivation in that now I need to try harder to impress colleges as my freshman year GPA was not very good.

In addition, Bob stated that honors-level English Language Arts classes offered “more challenging work and more freedom to work the way that helps me best (less micromanagement). I learned that the best way to motivate people is to give them a certain amount of freedom.” Brittney stated that the honors-level English Language Arts was “great for my development not only as a student, but as a person” and “taught me how to think critically, dig deeper to find truth and meanings within various texts, and has also helped me to think

‘outside of the box.’” Brittney also learned about “new social experiences” through increased collaboration. Billy stated that he has consistently “performed well” in honors-level English Language Arts classes. Interestingly, although Emily did not have prior experience in honors-level English Language Arts classes, of her current enrollment experience, she reported that “I liked it because you go more into depth and I think it goes faster.”

#### Questionnaire Item Six

In response to questionnaire item number six, six (100%) honors-level research participants responded favorably to honors-level English Language Arts classes. Conversely, six (100%) honors-level research participants responded unfavorably to standard-level English Language Arts classes. Two (33.3%) honors-level research participants indicated that they felt that honors- and standard-level English Language Arts classes were similar, while four (66.7%) indicated that there were differences between honors- and standard-level English Language Arts classes. When responding about their attitudes toward honors- and standard-level English Language Arts classes, each response was similar. Specifically, Julia stated that “I believe that standard classes tend to be more for kids who don't behave like they should in a classroom setting. I also believe that Honors classes and Standard classes are very similar but the people in them are not.” Conversely, James stated that

standard isn't difficult enough to test my knowledge, however, for some students they may feel more comfortable taking an easier route. I feel as if Honors classes are more my style as I like challenges and prefer to be able to learn more to be able to succeed in life.

In addition, Bob stated that “I think that standard level English classes are for anyone who struggle in honors level classes” and that “honors level classes are for people that are not challenged in standard level classes.” Furthermore, Bob shared that

I feel proud to be in an honors level English class as opposed to a standard level class because of the GPA boost and how it would look on college applications, but I also believe that I am gaining an overall better learning experience.

Brittney stated that “I believe I am supposed to be nothing less than an honors student just considering the time that has been put into obtaining a good start to an education.” In addition, Brittney also shared “my dad has had a decent job for a long time and the ability to have money for food, learning resources, extracurricular activities and is the sole reason why I am fortunate to do what I do.” Conversely, Billy stated that “I believe that there is nothing wrong with taking a standard level English” but that “my dad sort of forced me to take at least one honors class and English seemed the easiest for me to take since I was good at writing and reading.” He also stated that “taking an English Honors language arts class makes me feel good.” Emily reported that “I feel like honor students has more focused kids and kids who actually care about their grades for the most part whereas standard English class is more disruptive and not many kids in standard take it too seriously.”

### Questionnaire Item Seven

In response to questionnaire item number seven, six (100%) honors-level research participants responded that they had concerns about taking standard-level English Language Arts classes, and one (16.7%) participant expressed concerns about taking honors-level English Language Arts classes. When responding about their concerns toward honors- and standard-level

English Language Arts classes, each response was similar. Specifically, Julia stated that “kids would be too loud and make it a hard environment to focus in.” Conversely, James stated that standard-level English Language Arts classes “might not push me or other students hard enough and they don't provide enough learning material.” In addition, Bob expressed that “I am concerned that there is not enough challenging and stimulating work, and there is no GPA boost. I require work that is stimulating enough for me to remain focused and engaged in class and motivated to do any homework.” Brittney stated that boredom in standard-level English Language Arts classes causes students to become “unmotivated, so if I took a standard-level class I feel like it would change my hard work ethic and make me become less willing to take the extra step for my education.” Conversely, Billy stated that “it wouldn't be challenging, and honors looks better on your college transcript.” Emily stated that honors-level English Language Arts classes are “faster, and more in depth versus standard.”

#### Current 10<sup>th</sup> Grade English Language Arts Standard Classes

##### Questionnaire Item Five

In response to questionnaire item number five, three (50.0%) standard-level research participants responded that they did have experience with taking honors-level English Language Arts classes, while three (50.0%) standard-level research participant responded that they did not have experience with taking honors-level English Language Arts classes. Furthermore, three (50.0%) of the participants responded favorably to their experiences in honors-level English Language Arts classes. Two (33.3%) standard-level research participants responded indifferently to their experiences in honors-level English Language Arts classes, while one (16.7%) standard-

level research participant did not respond regarding their experience. When responding to what they learned from these experiences, each response varied. Specifically, Theo stated that

it taught me that if I want to succeed then I actually need to try and do my best. In middle school I didn't try. It also brought to my attention that I really like to read and write. I had a very good social and educational experience in my honor's English classes.

Conversely, Jean stated that "before I looked at advanced class as higher leveled thinking for smart kids. I wouldn't refer to myself as smart." In addition, Jean stated that "I would not say I learned anything special in honors that I didn't learn in this [standard] class this year." Dunkin stated, "I do not feel I have gained any experience in it besides learning new types of literary elements and further developing my literary skills." Also, Angel stated that "it seems to be the same, but a little bit slower. I do think I learned from these experiences, although I feel better in a standard classroom." Dia simply reported that "I haven't taken an English honors class."

#### Questionnaire Item Six

In response to questionnaire item number six, four (66.7%) standard-level research participants responded favorably to honors-level English Language Arts classes, while two (33.3%) standard-level research participants responded unfavorably to honors-level English Language Arts classes. Conversely, three (50.0%) standard-level research participants responded favorably to standard-level English Language Arts classes. One (16.7%) standard-level research participant responded indifferently to standard-level English Language Arts classes. Two (33.3%) standard-level research participants indicated that they felt that honors- and standard-level English Language Arts classes were similar, while four (66.7%) indicated that there were differences between honors- and standard-level English Language Arts classes. When



responding about their attitudes toward honors- and standard-level English Language Arts classes, responses varied. Specifically, Theo stated that

I feel like to me they are a lot easier. I don't feel like there is really any real difference between standard and honors besides the pace. I feel like standard is for people who are more laid back and don't work. I also feel like people take it because they genuinely have troubles with English.

Furthermore, Theo stated,

in my opinion a majority of the time the smarter people take the honors. I feel like when we think of standard, we think of the dumb people who don't do any work and are lazy. For honors we think of the try-hards and the really smart people. We don't really take into account that for some people English language arts comes naturally and to others it doesn't.

In addition, she said,

I honestly think I belong in standard, but some others believe I should go higher. I don't like it because some friends seem happy for me while others are kind of mean about it and say things like, 'You're only in standard to make the rest of us look bad.' I know it should be my decision, but others seem to influence that decision.

Conversely, Jean stated,

my point of view of standard classes is that's where kids who are just average go. the kids who don't push themselves or are just mentally challenged. Honor classes are where intelligent people go. People who actually care about their education. What shaped this idea was seeing the different type of people that were in these classes and how they behaved. Some would act like they didn't want to be there. Talking about it makes me feel more confident about it.

In addition, Milton stated, "I enjoy standard level more than I did honors, I just believe honors classes have more motivated students which causes a better work environment then standard.

Some student placed in standard classes just are rebellious and air-headed with causes problems." Also, Dunkin stated that standard-level English Language Arts classes

are even less challenging than honors and the only students who take it are the ones who want to relieve the stresses of more homework [...] Honors level classes are almost the exact same as standard level classes but it just goes faster.

Angel stated that she feels indifferent toward standard-level English Language Arts classes, but that “people in honors seem stuck up about their level and how smart they are. I’ve noticed this since I’ve been around them and noticed that they brag about their level in said class.” Angel also shared that she felt “uncomfortable if I’m around honors students due to feeling judged by people in those classes.” Dia reported that “I think standard is a relatively easy, but I don’t like doing paperwork” and “honors is a bit more strict with deadlines and what the course includes and there’s typically more work.”

#### Questionnaire Item Seven

In response to questionnaire item number seven, three (50.0%) standard-level research participants responded that they had concerns about taking honors-level English Language Arts classes, and one (16.7%) participant expressed concerns about taking standard-level English Language Arts classes. Two (33.3%) standard-level research participant did not express concerns about either honors- or standard-level English Language Arts classes. When responding about their concerns toward honors- and standard-level English Language Arts classes, some responses varied. Specifically, Theo stated that “in an honors class, it scares me how much work could be involved” and she questioned “will I have to be more prepared and will I have to act different in class.” Theo believed that a “standard class seems easier to me and I don't have to worry about those things. My concerns for a standard level are just what will it do to my GPA.” Conversely, Jean expressed that “I feel that I would struggle or lag behind. That I would be miserable trying to catch up.” Milton did not express concerns and preferred to be placed in standard-level English Language Arts classes. Also, Dunkin did not express concerns and preferred to be placed

in honors-level English Language Arts classes. Interestingly, Angel reported that “I feel like I’d be less motivated in an honors class because I’ll feel as though I don’t belong.” Furthermore, Dia stated that “in standard you’re not around people who challenge your thinking and people don’t always understand and tends to slow down the class and lesson plan.”

### Research Question #2 (RQ2)

Research question two (RQ2) explored what factors contributed to 10th grade English Language Arts students’ motivations to self-select higher and lower academic tracks. Questionnaire items number eight, nine, and ten gathered information regarding the research participants’ thoughts about differences in relationships with teachers who teach standard- or honors-level English Language Arts classes, their perception of their own identity as well as the impact that the level of English Language Arts enrollment has on their identity from the perspective of peers and adults, and their preparedness in succeeding in standards-level or honors-level English Language Arts classes, considering their current experiences. In order to determine factors of motivation, the researcher coded the responses of questionnaire items number eight, nine, and ten.

### Current 10<sup>th</sup> Grade English Language Arts Honors Classes

#### Questionnaire Item Eight

In response to questionnaire item number eight, six (100%) honors-level research participants responded that there might be differences in relationships with standard- or honors-level English Language Arts teachers. Furthermore, six (100%) honors-level research

participants responded favorably to honors-level English Language Arts teachers. Specifically, Julia stated that “I’ve never had a standard teacher before. But I feel they may not try as hard.” In addition, James stated that “I feel as if honors teachers get more involved with students and motivate the students to perform well. While standard teachers tend to do just what is required of them.” Bob stated that “I think that I have a better relationship with my honors level teachers than my standard level teachers [...] because of how they interact with me in class.” Also, Brittney stated, “to me personally I think that my honors teachers are more motivated to help kids out and they push the kids to reach outside of their comfort zone. That clearly isn’t true for every honors teacher but from the differences I’ve noticed these ones are very evident.” Furthermore, Billy expressed, “I personally believe that teachers put more effort in when teaching an honors class because they can tell that the students want a challenge and want to learn more than the basic level standard class.” Emily also reported, “honors teachers somewhat care more about your grades, they know you signed up for honors to go the extra mile so that is what they expect from you, so if you’re not excelling in that class they may encourage you more than another teacher.”

#### Questionnaire Item Nine

In response to questionnaire item number nine, five (83.3%) honors-level research participants responded that peers and adults could perceive them in certain ways because of the level of English Language Arts class they are enrolled in, while one (16.3%) participant responded indifferently. Furthermore, five (83.3%) honors-level research participants responded that the perception of honors-level English Language Arts enrollment was favorable, while one

(16.3%) participant responded indifferently. Specifically, Julia stated that “I do believe that there are some bias against people who are in standard classes and the stereotypical that they aren't smart.” In addition, James stated that “I feel as my peers could view me as a smarter student and would be more trustworthy of me if I take honors classes. I also want to make my grandparents proud to have another successful member in the family.” Bob stated that “I think that peers and adults perceive me as more intelligent because of my honors classes and the grades I have in my classes because it makes me seem more motivated and responsible than if I were taking [standard].” Conversely, Brittney stated, “I don't think my peers would judge me based on the classes I take. I know people who are very hard working but just take a while to learn things as fast as others and that's completely okay. If I were in a lower level English class, I would try to do what I could to improve.” Furthermore, Billy expressed, “Yes I think that if you take a higher level class in anything that your peers and adults would be proud of you.” Emily also reported, “Yes I believe kids who take honors versus standard are automatically granted to be ‘more smart’ by assumption but in reality anyone can take an honors class if they have the work ethic.”

#### Questionnaire Item Ten

In response to questionnaire item number ten, six (100%) honors-level research participants responded that they felt prepared in succeeding in both a standard-level class and an honors-level class, considering their current experiences. Specifically, Julia stated that “I do believe that I have been set up to succeed by the teachers that I have had.” In addition, James stated that “I do feel prepared to succeed in an honors level class. I feel as if I could achieve what my dad could and be successful in school and hopefully become successful as an adult.” Bob

stated that “I feel prepared succeeding in honors level classes because of how my teacher has prepared me in terms of the amount and type of homework, amount of in class work and quizzes/tests and amount of participation in leadership.” Brittney stated, “I feel very prepared in succeeding in a standard-level class. I was fortunate to be in a school district that focused heavily on giving every child a good education. The support and foundation I've had has helped me to conquer challenges inside and outside of the classroom.” Furthermore, Billy expressed, “Yes, I have always taken a high-level English class and I feel prepared.” Emily also reported, “Yes I feel like my teachers have prepared me for my future endeavors in English III Honors because over this school year I have received a lot of work and given short amounts of time to complete it at times so I have learned to balance and get myself in line, I am prepared.”

#### Current 10<sup>th</sup> Grade English Language Arts Standard Classes

##### Questionnaire Item Eight

In response to questionnaire item number eight, three (50%) standard-level research participants responded that there might be differences in relationships with standard- or honors-level English Language Arts teachers, while three (50%) standard-level research participants responded indifferently. Furthermore, two (33.3%) standard-level research participants responded favorably to honors-level English Language Arts teachers, one (16.7%) participant responded favorably to standard-level English Language Arts teachers, and three (50%) participants responded indifferently. Specifically, Theo stated that “I feel like most standard teachers are more laid back and chill while honors level teachers can be more uptight and less understanding.” In addition, Jean stated that “I feel that maybe teachers would enjoy teaching

honors classes more because the kids there would actually respect them. That would reflect back on the students since the teacher would be more kind and nourishing to the class.” Milton stated that “I believe standard classes are more busy work then on your own pace.” Also, Dunkin stated, “no, because no matter what, a teacher is a teacher it is up to the student or the teacher to connect and interact with each other even if it seems that a higher level teacher would be more strict, I do not think that is the case.” Furthermore, Angel expressed, “I feel as though there won’t be any difference because some of the teachers are the same for standard and honors.” Dia also reported, “whether I like my teachers and get along with them is up to them. typically, I’m friendly towards all to teachers but depending on their personalities I’m closer with some more than others.”

#### Questionnaire Item Nine

In response to questionnaire item number nine, six (100%) standard-level research participants responded that peers and adults could perceive them in certain ways because of the level of English Language Arts class they are enrolled in. Furthermore, six (100%) standard-level research participants responded that the perception of honors-level English Language Arts enrollment was favorable. Specifically, Theo stated that

Yes. I feel if I tell my mom I'm in standard she will be disappointed in me but if I take an honors class, she'll be happy. Some of my peers will say I need to be in honors if I'm in standard and others just don't care. I also fear that if I tell people that I'm in honors they will think I'm showing off.

In addition, Jean stated that

There is stereotyping in school. People with higher level classes are seen as smart or intelligent. Sometimes they will look down on the people who are not. But personally, I

don't think it's up to how smart you are. It's up to how much you're willing to push yourself to strive to get better.

Milton stated that

I do think the level classes you are in affect how people look at you and think of you nowadays people are judged so fast over anything and if you are in certain classes you are perceived as smart or dumb [there is] really no middle.

Furthermore, Dunkin stated, "the first thing people would believe is that a student is not as smart as them since they are taking a lower-level class." Also, Angel expressed, "some people believe you are dumber if you enroll in a standard class." Dia reported, "the people I know don't judge me on the classes I take because my teachers and peers that know me know I'm really smart just incredibly lazy."

#### Questionnaire Item Ten

In response to questionnaire item number ten, four (66.7%) standard-level research participants responded that they felt prepared in succeeding in both a standard-level class and an honors-level class, considering their current experiences. One (16.7%) standard-level research participant responded that they felt prepared in succeeding in a standard-level class and not an honors-level class, considering their current experiences. One (16.7%) standard-level research participant responded that they felt unprepared in succeeding in both a standard-level class and an honors-level class, considering their current experiences. Specifically, Theo stated that "I think I could definitely succeed in a standard level class but I'm not sure about an honors level class. The work load and pace, to me, is completely different." In addition, Jean stated that "Yes. I feel that my teacher has prepared me for it. Teachers are the most important part of students gaining confidence. It helps to have a supportive teacher saying that you can achieve greater



things.” Milton stated that “yes I do I’ve really never had any trouble gliding through English in my eyes it would be harder to fail then pass.” Also, Dunkin stated, “Yes, since I am already succeeding in this [standard] class now and it already seems easy.” Furthermore, Angel expressed, “I feel as though I wouldn’t be prepared for neither honors nor standard because my level of motivation is already very low.” Dia also reported,

I think I can do well in any class I’m in, it just depends on the amount of effort I put it in. most of them time if I enjoy the subject and the teacher I do my work especially if I like the assignments I’m given. if I don’t like the subject, I definitely don’t do my work. I don’t like to do things I don’t want to.

#### Key Quotes, Codes, and Categories

Emerging themes were developed from the written narrative responses based on the research questions: Research question one (RQ1): What are 10th grade English Language Arts students’ attitudes towards higher and lower academic tracks?, Research question two (RQ2): What factors contribute to 10th grade English Language Arts students’ motivation to self-select higher and lower academic tracks? Key quotes from research participants were identified by the ten codes: challenge, curiosity, cooperation, control, recognition, perceived academic/career benefits, perceived learning environment, teacher influences, familial influences, and peer influences. Besides these codes, two additional themes emerged from this study: internal motivation (implicit) and external motivation (explicit). Table 3 and Table 4 show key quotes, codes, and categories for current 10th grade English Language Arts Honors and Standard classes, respectively.

(See Appendix E for Table 3).

(See Appendix F for Table 4).

The following chapter will explore the conclusions that may be drawn from this research study. This chapter will outline a brief summary of the research and the design, followed by a discussion of the conclusions of the research study, educational implications, and the recommendations for future research on the topic of 10th grade English Language Arts students' attitudes and motivations towards standard and honors-level classes.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

*“The problem, after all, is not with the voices that speak but with the ears that do not hear” (Casey, 1995, p. 223).*

This chapter explores the conclusions that may be drawn from this research study. This chapter will outline a brief summary of the research and the design, followed by a discussion of the conclusions of the research study, educational implications, and the recommendations for future research on the topic of 10th grade English Language Arts students ideas, experiences, and attitudes toward higher and lower academic tracks, and factors of motivation to select such tracks.

### Summary of Research

The purpose of this narrative research was to explore motivation through the overt and covert narratives of 10th grade English Language Arts students, who self-select higher and lower academic tracks at a large, southeastern, public high school through a qualitative unstructured questionnaire. This study also observes 10th grade English Language Arts students’ ability to discuss these issues.

Using information from a 10-question qualitative, unstructured questionnaire of twelve (12) research participants, this thesis explored the following questions: Research question one (RQ1): What are 10th grade English Language Arts students’ attitudes towards higher and lower academic tracks?, Research question two (RQ2): What factors contribute to 10th grade English Language Arts students’ motivation to self-select higher and lower academic tracks?

Questionnaires were conducted in-person and recorded in a quiet, neutral location where the research participants were not in danger and where the research participants felt was a private atmosphere. No other people, other than the researcher and the research participants, were present during the time of the session. Due to the nature of unstructured questionnaires, the research participants often offered varying responses. This may have caused data to become skewed, or difficult to analyze due to the complexities offered with each response. However, the researcher preferred unstructured questionnaire items, with the possibility of varying responses, rather than alternative methods, because the topic of motivation and beliefs were quite complex. There was a large possibility that each research participant had a unique response to any given questionnaire item.

Significant data, themes, and ideas correlated directly to research questions. Furthermore, the research participant's direct words were used to illustrate significant data, themes, and ideas. Specific groups of data, themes, and ideas were developed into a descriptive narrative. The researcher interpreted and analyzed this to determine meanings and implications for 10th grade English Language Arts students, as well as the education system.

#### Research Question #1 (RQ1)

Research question one (RQ1) explored 10th grade English Language Arts students' attitudes towards higher and lower academic tracks, regarding the research participants' personal experiences with, and attitudes and concerns towards honors- and standard-level English Language Arts classes.

The silenced narratives of marginalized students were revealed as a result of allowing them the space to share experiences and reflections of their secondary educational experiences related to tracking. The researcher uncovered ongoing overt and covert narratives in the metanarrative of institutional tracking and its explicit and implicit impacts on students. Although afforded the same opportunities for academic advancement through self-selected tracking systems, groups of students continued to tragically reinforce divisions by self-selecting lower tracks with self-reported instructional inequities and implicit socioeconomic and instructional inequities. The researcher in this study analyzed the discourse of written narratives to determine attitudes of honors- and standard-level students toward higher and lower academic tracks with the purpose of understanding why some students are continually complicit in the production of educational disparities, which perpetuated the narrative of deficit due to social conflict.

#### Honors-Level Students' Attitudes Toward Higher and Lower Academic Tracks

Six (100%) honors-level participants responded positively in their attitudes toward honors-level courses. This meant that honors-level students reported positive perceived thoughts and/or feelings toward honors-level English Language Arts classes. Furthermore, six (100%) honors-level participants responded negatively in their attitudes toward standard-level courses. This meant that honors-level students reported negative perceived thoughts and/or feelings toward standard-level English Language Arts classes. The result that honors-level students had positive attitudes toward honors-level classes was expected due to the social conflict theory in which populations of power live up to societal expectations and reinforce divisions of class. In

this case, the overt narratives of honors-level students indicated that they subscribed to expecting favorable results in honors-level classes.

For example, Julia stated, “I have only taken Honors English and each English class I've taken have been relatively easy” and “I believe that standard classes tend to be more for kids who don't behavior like they should in a classroom setting. I also, believe that Honors classes and Standard classes are very similar but the people in them are not.” Julia expressed a positive attitude toward honors-level classes because she has been successful in her past experiences with challenging work. Essentially, her past successes were symbolic of her position of power and reinforced her privilege. Her second statement indicated that she felt a sense of belonging in honors-level classes as opposed to standard because of her perceived desirable behavior.

Although Julia may have agreed that honors- and standard-level English Language Arts classes were not significantly different, she self-selected the higher track because of her affinity to the population it served. Hence, she continued to fulfil the self-fulfilling prophecy of high expectations and outcomes.

Furthermore, Bob stated, “I have had 5 years (3 middle school and 2 high school) I have had an enjoyable experience in these classes.” Like Julia, Bob’s past successes in middle school and beyond reinforced his positive experiences to have positive attitudes toward and thus self-select higher tracked classes. Because of his extended positive experiences in higher tracked classes in the past, Bob continued to feel a sense of belonging toward those classes. Therefore, Bob had a positive attitude toward higher tracked classes and maintained a position of privilege over lower-tracked students.

Similarly, Brittney stated, “I feel like the experiences in both of these classes have been great for my development not only as a student, but as a person.” Brittney reported that she had past experiences in honors-level classes, and therefore sought new experiences to continue her positive development as a person, which reinforced her self-concept. Brittney believed in the benefit of self-selecting honors-level English Language Arts classes, and therefore expected favorable results in the future. In addition, Brittney shared, “I don't think standard ELA art classes are for me just taking into account the amount of hard work I put into everything I do.” This statement covertly expressed a negative attitude toward standard-level classes because it suggested that standard-level classes did not have high expectations of work ethic for students. Later, Brittney detailed, “I believe I am supposed to be nothing less than an honors student just considering the time that has been put into obtaining a good start to an education.” Here, Brittney’s true sentiment as an honors-level student was exposed as she directly expressed that she felt a strong sense of belonging in honors-level classes as opposed to standard because of her high level of dedication to her education. The implicit bias in her statement suggested that Brittney did not believe that standard-level classes offered “a good start to an education.” Therefore, she responded negatively toward standard-level classes and self-selected honors-level classes. This further developed the narrative of deficit as Brittney covertly reinforced systems of division between herself and her standard-level peers.

Billy shared, “I have, I've taken English Honors since I was in 6th grade and performed very well throughout my whole ‘school career.’” Again, the recurring theme of past successes informing future decisions was present as Billy continued to self-select higher-tracked classes. Billy continued, “Taking an English Honors language arts class makes me feel good” which

added to the overt narrative of reporting a positive attitude toward honors-level classes as opposed to standard-level classes. Billy demonstrated a favorable outlook toward higher level tracks because he had a positive educational outcome as a result of being privileged in an implicit power struggle.

Conversely, James had one negative previous experience in an honors-level class in which he failed his 9th grade English Language Arts honors class and had to attend a credit recovery class during summer school. However, instead being deterred from seeking future enrollment and expressing negative attitudes toward higher tracked classes, James used this critical incident as a reflective moment for improvement. James shared, "I am disappointed that I had failed the class, but I went to summer school to make up credit and I find motivation in that now." Because James took responsibility for his actions and expressed his feelings of disappointment, he was able to overcome the difficulty and continued to report positive thoughts and feelings toward honors-level classes. Furthermore, James stated, "I feel as if standard isn't difficult enough to test my knowledge, however, for some students they may feel more comfortable taking an easier route." This overt statement about James's perceptions of standard-level classes as being "[not] difficult enough" and "easier" further suggested that honors-level students respond positively to honors-level classes and negatively toward standard-level classes. Although James had a critical incident which challenged his self-concept, he overcame it because he acknowledged the perceived differences and recognized a system of privilege against lower-tracked classes which he did not subscribe to. Therefore, although he did not have a prior positive experience in honors-level classes, he changed his position and continued to seek success to reinforce his internal narrative and impact his development of self.



Finally, although Emily had no past experiences in honors-level English Language Arts classes, she stated, “I liked it [this year] because you go more into depth and I think it goes faster.” Her positive comments about her attitudes toward honors-level cases being “more in depth” and “faster” indicated that she believed standard-level classes are inequitable in the instructional quality and overall educational experience. Emily recognized the instructional inequities of lower-tracked classes and used this to impact her attitude toward them. Instead of falling victim to the implicit power struggle of the inequities, she consciously chose higher-tracked classes to elevate herself and remove barriers in her educational outcomes.

#### Consideration of Demographic Background on the Attitudes of Honors-Level Students Toward Higher and Lower Academic Tracks

It was the position of the researcher to call attention to the demographic background of the research participants to give the conclusions an added layer of descriptive meaning. It is important to analyze the student narratives with careful consideration of their background, particularly socioeconomic status and parental educational attainment. When considering the conclusions of the overt and covert narratives revealed by honors-level students, it was interesting to also consider the following information: only two (33.3%) participants were identified as Economically Disadvantaged in this sample population. Specifically, Julia’s parents’ highest level of education was a bachelor’s degree; James’s mother earned her high school diploma and father earned his doctorate in law; Bob’s parents’ highest level of education was a bachelor’s degree; Brittney’s parents’ highest level of education was a bachelor’s degree; Billy’s parents’ highest level of education was an associate’s degree; and Emily’s parents’ highest level of education was a high school diploma. Interestingly, both James and Billy were

identified as Economically Disadvantaged. The purpose of discussing the socioeconomic status and educational attainment was to make the connection that all six (100%) of honors-level students responded favorably to higher tracks and unfavorably to lower tracks and were positioned at a greater socioeconomic advantage compared to the standard-level sample population. Given these results, it was assumed that an important factor in having a positive attitude toward higher academic tracks was derived from having parents who valued educational attainment and thus sought a desirous socioeconomic status. Because five (83.3%) honors-level students had at least one parent with a college degree, a positive correlation was made between high socioeconomic status and a high parental educational attainment to a positive attitude toward higher-tracked classes. Also, interestingly, although James was identified as Economically Disadvantaged, because his father earned the highest collegiate degree available, he reported a positive attitude toward higher-tracked classes. In addition, Billy was also identified as Economically Disadvantaged, but reported that his parents attained a college degree and thus reported a positive attitude toward higher-tracked classes. This consideration enhanced the understanding of socioeconomic and familial inequities in the implicit power struggle of privilege present in higher and lower tracked classes. Still, further narrative analysis will be analyzed under Research Question Two regarding the specific factors that honors-level students described in response to their level of motivation to self-select a higher academic track.

#### Standard-Level Students' Attitudes Toward Higher and Lower Academic Tracks

Still, the fascinating phenomenon lay in the truth that most standard-level students also reported having positive attitudes toward higher tracks, yet they did not self-select such tracks.

Four (67.7%) standard-level students responded positively in their attitudes toward honors-level courses. Furthermore, three (50%) standard-level research participants responded negatively toward standard-level courses. Therefore, although standard-level students reported negative attitudes toward standard-level tracks, they continued to perpetuate the division of classes by self-selecting such tracks.

Specifically, Theo reported,

In middle school I took honors English. I didn't take them 9th and 10th grade just because I ended all my middle school years with a C. It taught me that if I want to succeed then I actually need to try and do my best. In middle school I didn't try. It also brought to my attention that I really like to read and write. I had a very good social and educational experience in my honors English classes

Although Theo had prior experience in honors-level English Language Arts classes in middle school, she did not self-select honors-level classes in high school. Instead, because she did not experience a level of success that she originally expected by earning a “C,” she inexplicitly determined that she was not capable of experiencing success in future enrollment. Although she cited that she should try her best, she chose to self-select standard-level classes, which indicated that she did not actually desire to put effort toward maximizing her true potential in higher-tracked classes. Instead, she was complicit in the production of educational disparities because of she feared of risking further disappointment in herself. Therefore, although she expressed having a positive attitude toward honors-level classes, she did not disrupt the narrative of deficit and allowed herself to become comfortable in taking standard-level classes, which further impacted her self-concept negatively. This is evident in her later statement, “I honestly think I belong in standard, but some others believe I should go higher.” Therefore, although she reported having a “very good social and educational experience in my honors English classes,” she did not feel a

sense of belonging in honors-level classes as opposed to standard because of her negative self-concept. Instead, she covertly continued to perpetuate the narrative of deficit by not seeking future enrollment in higher tracks, despite reporting positive past experiences. Furthermore, she internalized the social conflict that she faced, which inevitably led to instructional inequities.

Conversely, Jean shared that “Honor classes are where intelligent people go. People who actually care about their education.” Although Jean had a positive attitude toward honors-level classes, this overt narrative implicitly implied that Jean did not subscribe to the idea that he was “intelligent” or “care[d] about [his] education.” This was compounded with his statement, “I wouldn’t refer to myself as smart” when asked how he felt about his educational experiences. Unfortunately, although Jean agreed that honors-level classes were favorable, he did not subscribe to expecting favorable results in honors-level classes because of his negative self-concept. Instead, Jean remained comfortable in avoiding the risk associated with self-selecting a higher academic track because of his perceived academic ability. Jean perceived that he was powerless in the implicit power struggle of his self-concept because he accepted the idea that he was not capable or worthy of participating in higher-tracked classes. Moreover, he reinforced the instructional inequities that he experienced and therefore did not feel equipped to advance to higher tracked classes.

Dunkin responded similarly that “I feel it was an okay class” in regard to previously taking an honors-level class and admitted that perhaps “I feel like standard - level English classes are even less challenging than honors and the only students who take it are the ones who want to relieve the stresses of more homework on top of the other higher - level classes.” This gave insight into the possible reasoning of why Dunkin self-selected a standard-level class instead of

an honors-level class, which was to relieve “stress” on top of other academic pressures. Although he did not overtly state this, the research concluded that Dunkin selected a lower-level English Language Arts class to alleviate other pressures. However, the idea that self-selecting standard-level classes to avoid academic challenges added to the theme that Dunkin was complicit in the production of educational disparities, which should not be promoted in any educational setting. He allowed himself to perpetuate division and inequities by not seeking additional challenges.

Conversely, Milton’s attitude toward higher tracked classes was nuanced in although he stated, “I enjoy standard level more than I did honors” he also believed that “honors classes have more motivated students which causes a better work environment than standard.” Therefore, based on his latter response, it was presumed that Milton expressed positive thoughts and/or feelings toward honors-level classes attributed to peers with higher motivation and a positive learning environment, but he still self-selected a standard-level class because of personal preference. The overt narrative suggested that Milton did not subscribe himself to being motivated or deserving of a positive learning environment, therefore, he did not feel a sense of belonging in honors-level classes as opposed to standard. Instead, he positioned himself in a realm of comfort in this environment and avoided the risk of being challenged. He overtly stated that was accepting of a disparity in his educational experience when he claimed that he preferred the lower-tracked class. He chose not to disrupt the narrative of deficit to avoid feeling threatened in a population that he perceived as different from himself. He allowed himself to associate with the lowered expectations of lower-tracked classes, which implicitly impacted his self-concept.

### Consideration of Demographic Background on the Attitudes of Standard-Level Students Toward Higher and Lower Academic Tracks

Again, it was the position of the researcher to call attention to the demographic background of the research participants to give the conclusions an added layer of descriptive meaning. It was important to analyze the student narratives with careful consideration of their background, particularly socioeconomic status and parental educational attainment. When considering the conclusions of the overt and covert narratives revealed by standard-level students, it was interesting to also consider the following information: five (83.3%) participants were identified as Economically Disadvantaged in this sample population. Specifically, Theo's mother's highest level of education was a bachelor's degree and her father's highest level of education was an associate degree; Jean's parents' highest level of education was a high school diploma; Milton's parent's highest level of education was a bachelor's degree; Dunkin's father's highest level of education was a high school and mother's was some college (did not earn degree); Angel's mother did not complete high school and father attended some college (did not earn degree); and Dia's parents' highest level of education was a master's degree and bachelor's degree. Interestingly, the only participant that was not identified as Economically Disadvantaged was Dia, whose parents earned the highest levels of educational attainment of the standard-level sample population.

The purpose of discussing the socioeconomic status and educational attainment was to make the connection that the four (67.7%) standard-level students that responded favorably to higher tracks and two (33.3%) responded unfavorably to higher tracks were positioned at a greater socioeconomic disadvantage than the honors-level sample population. Given these results, a proportion of standard-level students reported a positive attitude toward higher

academic tracks; however, their parent's educational attainment was lower, and thus their socioeconomic status was lower. Only three (50%) standard-level students had at least one parent with a college degree, and five (67.7%) were Economically Disadvantaged; therefore, it was insightful that although positive attitudes toward higher tracked classes were present, the students with low socioeconomic status and a low parental educational attainment did not actually self-select to enroll in honors-level classes. These findings supported a prevalence of socioeconomic inequity and familial inequity for standard-level students compared to their honors-level counterparts. Socioeconomic inequity is explained as "students from lower-income households, on average, underperform academically in relation to their wealthier peers, and they also tend to have lower educational aspirations and enroll in college at lower rates" (Great Schools Partnership, 2014). This standard-level sample population reflected a larger societal problem dating back to the 16th century in which the affluent students selected higher academic tracks, which led to higher future socioeconomic status.

Furthermore, an intersecting factor supported by the results included familial inequity in which "students may be disadvantaged in their education due to their personal and familial circumstances" (Great Schools Partnership, 2014). This derives from the students' parents who have not earned a high school or college degree as they were academically underperforming in relation to their honors-level peers. These findings were concerning as they continued to reinforce systems of privilege over marginalized groups. Interestingly, although these students had equal opportunity to self-select higher academic tracks, they were choosing not to because of inherent differences in socioeconomic status and familial background. Further narrative analysis

will be explained under Research Question Two regarding the specific factors that standard-level students described in response to their level of motivation to self-select a lower academic track.

#### Honors-Level Students' Perceived Differences Between Higher and Lower Academic Tracks

Four (67.7%) honors-level students responded that there were perceived differences between honors- and standard-level English Language Arts classes. Interestingly, honors-level students acknowledged the perceived differences between higher and lower tracks as represented in their overt narratives regarding perceived notions of ability-level and/or observed behaviors in respective classes.

For example, Julia stated that “I believe that standard classes tend to be more for kids who don't behave like they should in a classroom setting. I also believe that Honors classes and Standard classes are very similar but the people in them are not.” This statement supported the idea that the differences in higher and lower academic tracks were based on the students in each class, not necessarily the curriculum and associated factors. Julia did not subscribe herself to feeling a sense of belonging to a group of standard-level students who “do not behave like they should.” Therefore, it was assumed that she believed her behaviors were desirous in a classroom setting whereas standard-level students were unaware or incapable of behaving appropriately. This suggested a sense of division regarding how class and status impacted behavior in social settings. Furthermore, Julia stated that “kids would be too loud and make it a hard environment to focus in” when describing her concerns about enrolling in a standard-level class. Aside from citing that lower tracks did not serve a population that was aware of appropriate social behaviors, Julia also acknowledged that the learning environment in a standard-level class would be



difficult to effectively learn. She covertly reinforced and perpetuated divisions between higher and lower level tracked students which confirmed her position of privilege over her lower-level peers.

Conversely, James did not acknowledge differences in behaviors, but instead stated that

standard isn't difficult enough to test my knowledge, however, for some students they may feel more comfortable taking an easier route. I feel as if Honors classes are more my style as I like challenges and prefer to be able to learn more to be able to succeed in life.

Here, James indicated that the differences between the two classes were derived from the position of perceived instructional inequities, in which lower tracked classes were taught “by less-skilled teachers, who may teach in a comparatively uninteresting or ineffective manner, or in courses in which significantly less content is taught” (Great Schools Partnership, 2014).

Specifically, James was referred to not feeling challenged by lower-tracked classes and therefore not self-selecting them. Still, like Julia, James identified an important area of division between higher and lower-tracked classes, which was access to resources. In this case, the resources were a challenging curriculum, which James ascribed to future success. Therefore, James supported the covert narrative that lower-tracked students were at a greater disadvantage in life regarding attainment of success because they were not afforded the opportunity to “learn more.” James recognized the instructional inequities present in lower-tracked classes as a significant difference between the two.

To support James’s sentiments, Bob stated, “I am concerned that there is not enough challenging and stimulating work” in standard-level classes, which further suggested perceived differences in instructional equity from a perspective of privilege. Bob furthered the narrative of division and inequality by referencing perceived differences in instructional content.

Specifically, Bob did not believe that lower-tracked classes were “stimulating” which creates issues in educational outcomes for lower-tracked students and further reinforced systems of privilege.

Furthermore, Brittney overtly stated that “I believe I am supposed to be nothing less than an honors student just considering the time that has been put into obtaining a good start to an education.” Although not necessary problematic concerning her positive self-concept, this statement was unfortunate regarding her perceptions of standard-level classes of students due to the fact that the lower-tracked classes were perceived to underserve students so gravely that an honors-level student did not associate it with a “good education” whatsoever. Her statement that she is “nothing less than an honors student” reinforced systems of privilege and magnified the divisions between the honors-level and standard-level populations. Therefore, Brittney’s narrative also indicated significant perceived differences between honors and standard-level classes that is problematic for lower-tracked students.

Finally, Emily reported that “I feel like honor students has more focused kids and kids who actually care about their grades for the most part whereas standard English class is more disruptive and not many kids in standard take it too seriously.” Emily’s comments were significant because she was previously enrolled in 9th grade English Language Arts Standard and then enrolled in honors-level; therefore, she covertly revealed that she now identified as someone who was “more focused” and “care[ed] about [her] grades.” From her narrative, she did not feel a sense of belonging to students in the standard-level classes who she perceived as “disruptive” or unserious. Whereas the other five honors-level participants did not have direct experience in taking a standard-level English Language Arts class, Emily was able to inexplicitly

disrupt the narrative of deficit and sought risks in higher academic tracks. She reevaluated her position based on her perceptions and confirmed that she sought to enroll in higher-level classes. It was notable that Emily had direct experience with track switching and reported perceived differences between the higher and lower track, as well as reported a positive attitude toward higher tracks and a negative attitude toward lower tracks.

The results analyzed in this section supported the theme of the narrative of deficit regarding populations of students who self-selected lower academic tracks. Essentially, the honors-level students' narratives supported a position of privilege and power over others. In addition, the perspectives they shared were alarming in reinforcing and perpetuating division between honors- and standard-level students. The overt narratives that the honors-level students shared regarding their perceptions of standard-level classes represented the symbolic messages that were impacting the group with less power in the educational system. As evidenced before, "people shap[e] themselves based on other people's perception, which leads people to reinforce other people's perspectives on themselves. People shape themselves based on what other people perceive and confirm other people's opinion on themselves" (Strayer, Scaramuzzo, Griffiths, Keirns, & Cody-Rydzewski, 2015). Therefore, the symbolic messages that society received from honors-level students about their perceptions of standard level students and classes reinforced the negative perspectives that standard-level students had regarding their self-concept, which further impacted their level of motivation to overcome implicit power struggles. The results indicated a societal conflict in which the self-fulfilling prophecy occurred, and students lived up (or down) to the expectations. It was evident that honors-level students had strong attitudes toward standard-level classes and the differences present and used such to inadvertently create division.

With this to consider, it was interesting to analyze the overt and covert narratives of standard-level students about the perceived differences between higher and lower-tracked classes.

#### Standard-Level Students' Perceived Differences Between Higher and Lower Academic Tracks

Four (67%) standard-level students responded that there were differences between honors- and standard-level English Language Arts classes. Interestingly, standard-level students acknowledged the perceived differences between higher and lower tracks as represented in their overt narratives regarding perceived notions of ability-level and/or observed behaviors in respective classes.

As a standard-level student, Theo stated,

in my opinion a majority of the time the smarter people take the honors. I feel like when we think of standard, we think of the dumb people who don't do any work and are lazy. For honors we think of the try-hards and the really smart people. We don't really take into account that for some people English language arts comes naturally and to others it doesn't.

Theo was unique because she had prior experience in honors-level classes in middle school, and therefore had direct experience in both track levels. Like many of the sentiments of the honors-level students, Theo perpetuated the narrative that honors-level classes were reserved for “smarter people” and standard-level classes were for “dumb,” “lazy” people. According to this response, Theo believed that she was either “dumb” or “lazy” and did not attribute herself to being “smart” as evident in her selection to enroll in standard-level English Language Arts. Still, she did acknowledge the notion that some students may naturally excel in one level over another; however, that was incompatible with her perceived narratives based on her reported prior positive experiences in honors-level classes, in which she said she could have excelled if she had

given a greater effort. Through this, Theo's self-concept, and belief about others, was inexplicitly revealed through her covert narratives about the systematic differences between the leveled academic tracks. Because she self-selected a lower-track, Theo positioned herself at a disadvantage by associating with a population who she attributed negative qualities. She reinforced the divisions between herself and her honors-level peers by overtly acknowledging the perceived differences between them.

Furthermore, Jean stated,

my point of view of standard classes is that's where kids who are just average go. the kids who don't push themselves or are just mentally challenged. Honor classes are where intelligent people go. People who actually care about their education. What shaped this idea was seeing the different type of people that were in these classes and how they behaved. Some would act like they didn't want to be there. Talking about it makes me feel more confident about it.

As Jean already overtly expressed that he did not believe he was smart, the narrative above was an additional powerful statement about his construct of self. He cited explicit details about the significant differences between honors- and standard-level tracks. Specifically, he believed that honors-level classes were for "intelligent people" who "actually care about their education." Concurrently, Jean stated that standard-level classes were reserved for "average" kids who "don't push themselves or are just mentally challenged." This was directly correlated to symbolic interactionism because Jean received symbolic messages from outside sources that shaped and reinforced his beliefs about self, which he accepted into his self-schema. Jean was the one student from the sample population that was identified as Specific Learning Disabled and received Exceptional Student Education services. It was fascinating and heart-breaking that he was the only student in the study that attributed standard-level classes to being reserved for "mentally challenged" students. It was the theory of the researcher that Jean accepted symbolic

messages from outside sources about his disability over time and accepted this as a part of his self-concept, which negatively impacted his willingness and/or ability to disrupt the narrative of inequality. Jean identified significant difference between himself and his honors-level peers and internalized such narratives to the detriment of his educational experience.

In a different light, Angel shared that “people in honors seem stuck up about their level and how smart they are. I've noticed this since I've been around them and noticed that they brag about their level in said class.” Angel also shared that she felt “uncomfortable if I'm around honors students due to feeling judged by people in those classes.” Angel was also unique in that she self-selected to enroll in standard-level after being enrolled in 9th grade English Language Arts honors. Therefore, it is assumed that her negative experiences in that class led to her current perceptions of difference between her and her honors-level counterparts. Through her words, Angel referred indirectly to a system of privilege in which she believed she did not belong to. Angel felt “judged” by her honors-level peers; therefore, she attributed one difference between honors- and standard-level classes as being more judgmental. It was assumed that this was because the honors-level students that Angel encountered overtly expressed narratives of division and inequality that made her feel uncomfortable. This may be attributed to the fact that Angel was Economically Disadvantaged and both parents had a low educational attainment (her mother did not complete high school and her father did not complete college). Therefore, although she did not overtly attribute that as a reason for her discomfort, it was plausible that she did not feel a connection to the large proportion of honors-level students that were not affected by socioeconomic or familial inequities as she was.

Interestingly, three (75%) of the four standard-level students that expressed differences between honors- and standard-level classes were Economically Disadvantaged and had parents that did not achieve high educational attainment. Like Angel, both Theo and Jean were identified as Economically Disadvantaged. Although Theo's parents did earn college degrees (her mother's highest level of education was a bachelor's degree and her father's highest level of education was an associate degree), Jean's parents' highest level of education was a high school diploma.

Finally, Dia acknowledged some differences between honors- and standard-level classes, "I think standard is a relatively easy, but I don't like doing paperwork. honors are a bit more strict with deadlines and what the course includes and there's typically more work." Here, Dia recognized her perception of finding standard-level classes as easier and cited that honors-level classes may have stricter requirements, like workload and deadlines. However, she did not express covert narratives relating to her self-concept like the other standard-level research participants. This is an unfortunate attribution to instructional inequities that permeate in lower-level tracks, including higher expectations for student work and behavior. Because Dia did not seek challenges, she deliberately positioned herself in a place of inequity and devision.

#### Research Question #2 (RQ2)

Research question two (RQ2) explored what factors contributed to 10th grade English Language Arts students' motivations to self-select higher and lower academic tracks, including the participants' thoughts about differences in relationships with teachers who teach standard- or honors-level English Language Arts classes, their perception of their own identity as well as the impact that the level of English Language Arts enrollment has on their identity from the

perspective of peers and adults, and their preparedness in succeeding in standards-level or honors-level English Language Arts classes, considering their current experiences.

Because self-selected tracking provides equal opportunities for all students to attain high academic achievement, it was of great interest to discover the factors that motivate students to select higher or lower academic tracks. Again, the silenced narratives of marginalized students were revealed as a result of allowing them the space to share experiences and reflections of their secondary educational experiences related to tracking and compared to that of the population in power, honors-level students. The researcher uncovered ongoing overt and covert narratives in the metanarrative of institutional tracking and the factors of motivation, both internal and external, analyzed in students. The researcher in this study analyzed the discourse of written narratives to determine the factors of influence, in terms of both internal and external motivation, of honors- and standard-level students with the purpose of understanding why some students are continually complicit in the production of educational disparities. Honors- and standard-level students expressed several factors of external and internal motivation through both overt and covert narratives that allowed the researcher to identify key reasons why they self-selected higher or lower academic tracks.

#### Honors-Level Students' Internal Motivations Toward Higher and Lower Academic Tracks

##### Challenges

Six (100%) honors-level students overtly and covertly stated that willingness to seek challenges was a major factor in self-selecting of higher tracks. Of the six, four (83.3%) honors-



level participants shared overt narratives that supported the findings of seeking challenges as an important factor of internal motivation.

Specifically, James stated, “I like challenges.” Bob stated, regarding standard-level classes, “I am concerned that there is not enough challenging and stimulating work.” Billy stated that “for me to take a standard class it wouldn't be challenging.” Brittney stated that “The support and foundation I've had has helped me to conquer challenges inside and outside of the classroom.” Each of these students overtly cited that they sought increased challenges as a factor in their decision to select an honors-level class as opposed to a standard-level class. This internal motivating factor demonstrated that these honors-level students held positive beliefs about their abilities to overcome challenges with success. Because of positive past experiences, these honors-level students had an increased desire to strengthen their self-concept through challenges in higher-tracked classes. This positive interaction supported the self-fulfilling prophecy in which their positive attitude toward challenges enhanced their desire and ability to overcome such. Therefore, these honors-level students overtly recognized this strength and positioned themselves to experience such.

Furthermore, three (50%) students revealed covert narratives that suggested the importance of the desire to exert effort and determination as well. Specifically, Julia commented that honors-level classes were “relatively easy,” indicating that she had positive experiences in meeting challenges in higher-level classes. Because she was successful in meeting past challenges, Julia believed that she was especially able to overcome future challenges. Brittney stated that honors-level classes “taught me how to think critically,” which indicated that she experienced a level of increased challenge in higher-tracked classes that enhanced her critical

thinking skills. Emily enjoyed the increased difficulty in that honors-level classes were “faster.” Typically, increased pace indicated increased challenges. Also, James stated that “standard isn’t difficult enough to test my knowledge” and it “might not push me or other students hard enough.” James believed that lower-level classes were not challenging enough, therefore, he self-selected higher-tracked classes to increase the level of perceived challenges. These overt and covert narratives supported the finding that honors-level students actively sought challenges out of their comfort zone to further their educational experience. Not only was it implicitly deconstructed in several responses, but a large proportion of honors-level students overtly acknowledged the term “challenge,” which was associated with perceived risk. According to the narratives they shared, honors-level students were comfortable in taking risks to further redefine their educational outlook. The honors-level students were aware of the importance of seeking challenges and working toward conquering challenges as a means of increasing their educational outcomes. Actively seeking challenges had a positive correlation in as a significant factor in honors-level students’ internal motivation to self-select higher tracks as opposed to lower tracks. Although obviously a positive source of internal motivation, these narratives still expressed the perpetuation of division and inequality between higher and lower tracked classes. The idea that honors-level students did not associate lower tracked classes with a level of difficulty indicated the presence of instructional inequities, meaning that standard-level students were not exposed to equitable levels of instruction and content to benefit educational outcomes.

## Control

Five (83.3%) honors-level participants shared covert narratives that supported the findings of increasing control as an important factor of internal motivation. Although no students cited the term “control” in their narrative response, the research analyzed the significance of students indicating the factor of being in control of their own educational experiences and associated outcomes.

Specifically, Bob enjoyed “more freedom to work” and “less micromanagement” in honors-level classes, which indicated that he had increased control in his educational experience to freely learn without restrictions. Brittney stated that honors-level classes enhanced her “responsible decision making in the future” which increased her perceived control over future opportunities and her ability to make responsible decisions. James stated that “I do feel prepared in succeeding in an honors level class” which suggested he asserted increased control over his educational outcomes because he felt equipped to succeed. In addition, Julia stated that “I do believe that I have been set up to succeed by the teachers that I have had.” This added to the covert narrative of increased control over outcomes in education because she expressed positive feelings toward her ability to succeed. Finally, Billy expressed that “taking an English Honors language arts class makes me feel good.” Billy indicated that he had increased control over his feelings regarding his educational experiences, and thus continued to self-select higher level classes. The findings suggested that there were several covert expressed narratives that led to findings about enhanced a student’s level of control, ranging from control of educational decisions and educational outcomes, to control of future-oriented career outcomes, as well as control of positive feelings associated with high-tracked students. This was an important factor

of internal motivation because increased control in higher-level classes led to the association of other positive benefits. Because these honors-level students sought control over their educational experiences and outcomes, they reinforced the system of privilege to control their future successes.

### Recognition

Three (50%) honors-level students shared covert narratives that seeking positive recognition was a factor in self-selecting higher tracks. Seeking positive recognition included when students implicitly shared that they would enjoy having their accomplishments recognized by outside sources, including teachers, family members, and/or peers.

Specifically, when responding to concerns about enrolling in standard-level classes, Billy stated, “I wouldn’t like it because I have always taken English Honors and done well.” This indicated that Billy had a level of increased satisfaction because of his success in honors-level classes as evident in the recognition he received from his elevated status. He overtly stated that he had negative feelings toward enrollment in lower-tracked classes and he covertly attributed this to his perception that lower tracked classes are easier. With this, he enjoyed enrollment in honors-level classes because received positive societal recognition due to his successes. In this case, Billy expressed discontent when discussing enrollment in standard-level classes because he would not receive implicit recognition from outside societal influences.

Furthermore, Brittney shared similar sentiments in her narrative of recognition as she stated enrolling in honors-level classes would be “great for my development... as a person.” Brittney also covertly discussed positive recognition from society in her successes as an honors-

level student. She believed that enrolling in honors-level classes would benefit her status in society because she would be recognized as a “great” and well-developed person. Therefore, society would reinforce her self-concept in her enrollment of higher-tracked classes.

Conversely, James overtly expressed an individual that he sought recognition from: his father. James shared, “I feel as if I could achieve what my dad could and be successful in school and hopefully become successful as an adult.” Here, James explicitly named his father as a source of recognition and as a factor of internal motivation for self-selecting honors-level classes. Moreover, James added to the covert narrative expressed by Billy and Brittney in seeking societal recognition for perceived success in higher tracked classes. Directly or indirectly seeking recognition was a significant factor in some honors-level students’ motivation to self-select higher tracks as opposed to lower tracks. Receiving recognition from outside sources reinforced honors-level students’ perception of themselves, which enhanced their self-concept. Therefore, they responded positively toward the implicit power struggle in society between higher and lower tracked classes because they received positive reinforcement.

### Curiosity and Collaboration

One (16.7%) honors-level student covertly stated that a desire for curiosity and collaboration in the content was a factor of internal motivation in self-selecting higher tracks. The one participant that expressed this narrative was Brittney. Regarding a desire for curiosity and collaboration in honors-level classes, Brittney said,

These classes have taught me how to think critically, dig deeper to find truth and meanings within various texts, and has also helped me to think outside of the box,' an important skill that helps for responsible decision making in the future. With these

experiences also came new social experiences. I got to collaborate in groups and voice my opinion on topics which is something I don't usually get to do in other classes.

Brittney reflected on additional motivating factors, namely curiosity and collaboration, that other honors-level students did not acknowledge. Here, Brittney covertly stated that the English Language Arts subject grabbed her attention and created a stimulant for her brain. She referenced “dig[ging] deeper to find truth and meanings” and “think[ing] outside the box” which suggested that she wanted to learn more about English Language Arts. Because of the internal interest in the subject matter, matched with the perception that honors-level classes would satisfy such interests, she self-selected this as opposed to standard-level for a love of learning. Furthermore, she overtly recognized her desire to “collaborate in groups and voice my opinion” which was a unique experience afforded in the honors-level English Language Arts class. She attributed honors-level classes with the opportunity to receive desired experiences, rather than standard-level classes. Because of the perceived divisions and inequalities between higher and lower tracked classes, Brittney self-selected the one that she subscribed to. Each of these experiences were beneficial in the development of her increased internal motivation to self-select higher academic tracks.

#### Standard-Level Students' Internal Motivations Toward Higher and Lower Academic Tracks

##### Challenges

Standard-level students expressed several factors of internal motivation through both overt and covert narratives that allowed the researcher to identify key reasons why they self-selected lower academic tracks. Five (83.7%) standard-level students overtly and covertly shared an avoidance to challenges as a major factor of internal motivation to self-select lower tracks.

Specifically, Theo stated, “in an honors class, it scares me how much work could be involved” and “a standard class seems easier to me and I don't have to worry about those things.” This covertly demonstrated the narrative of avoidance of challenges as Theo admitted to experiencing negative emotions when thinking about the perceived challenges of honors-level classes. Because she was less challenged in a standard-level class, she felt a sense of comfort in the lack of risk. She literally stated that she “fear[ed]” the perception of challenge and risking failure, and therefore was internally motivated to self-select lower tracked classes. Because of this, Theo perpetuated the narrative of deficit in her negative attitudes toward perceived challenges. She was unable to recognize her ability to overcome challenges, which perpetuated inequality between herself and honors-level classes.

Jean shared that he believes standard-level classes are reserved for “kids who don’t push themselves.” With this, Jean reinforced the self-concept that he inexplicitly identified as a student who did not “push themselves.” Because Jean self-selected standard-level classes, he inadvertently admitted that he avoided perceived challenges. He did not subscribe to the narrative that he could push himself to overcome perceived challenges. Therefore, he perpetuated the idea that he was subjected to lowered expectations and lowered educational outcomes. He covertly perpetuated the narrative of deficit in thinking that he could not or would not exert effort to overcome challenges.

Furthermore, Milton shared, “I've really never had any trouble gliding through English in my eyes it would be harder to fail then pass” because he was enrolled in standard-level. This covert narrative aligned with the idea of avoiding challenges by citing that he “glid[ed] through English.” In order to maintain a desired level of comfort, Milton actively avoided challenges,

even stating that he preferred enrollment in standard-level classes. Like Jean, he perpetuated the narrative of deficit through lowered educational outcomes; however, he actively sought to do so. He was desirous of remaining divided from his honors-level peers.

In addition, Angel expressed that “I feel as though I wouldn’t be prepared for neither honors nor standard because my level of motivation is already very low.” Here, Angel was complacent in the production and perpetuation of disparities as she admitted to not even desiring a perceived challenge in either an honors- or standard-level class. She covertly disguised her avoidance of perceived challenges to being unprepared to cope with her feelings of inequality. However, truly she sought to avoid challenges to deeply that she would not even allow herself to encounter any risk. Though this, Angel sought to reinforce and perpetuate her negative self-concept by furthering inequality between higher and lower level tracks.

Otherwise, Dia overtly expressed that “in standard you’re not around people who challenge your thinking and people don’t always understand and tends to slow down the class and lesson plans.” Therefore, she acknowledged that self-selecting standard-level classes would avoid the perceived challenges of higher-tracked classes. Because she described herself as “lazy,” she did not want to encounter the risk of disrupting that narrative. So, she sought to deliberately perpetuate the narrative of deficit based on her perceptions and confirmations of her self-concept.

### Control

Four (66.7%) standard-level participants shared covert narratives that supported the findings of increasing control as an important factor of internal motivation in self-selecting lower



tracks. Although no students cited the term control in their narrative response, the research analyzed the significance of students indicating the factor of being in control of their own educational experiences by enrolling in lower-level tracks. This was interesting because the standard-level students' responses were somewhat similar to the honors-level students; however, it perpetuated an adverse narrative through undesired educational outcomes. Specifically, Theo stated that past successes in English Language Arts honors classes "brought to my attention that I really like to read and write." Although counterintuitive, Theo demonstrated an avoidance of challenges combined with an enjoyment of reading and writing. Because of this complexity, she desired to increase the control over her level of comfort in her successes in the content area, so she selected to enroll in a lower tracked class to ensure she functioned at a high level with ease and remained non-threatened by risk factors, such as possible failures. This was significant because it indicated that Theo did not disrupt her internal narrative that she would not realize success in higher tracked classes, although she stated that she was personally interested in the subject. This suggested that Theo valued having control over her educational outcomes despite reported inequalities.

In addition, Milton stated that "I don't have any concerns, I'd rather be placed in standard." Because Milton was not confronted by any concerns, or risks, in his enrollment in standard-level classes, the covert narrative of increased control over outcomes in education is prevalent. Milton sought increased control over the outcomes and chose to self-select lower-tracked classes to satisfy that internal factor of motivation. Milton deliberately remained in his realm of comfort, although it perpetuated divisions and inequalities between himself and his honors-level peers, to ensure control over his educational experiences and outcomes.

Furthermore, Dunkin stated that “since I am already succeeding in this class [standard] now and it already seems easy even though I am taking Advanced Placement [next year].” It was obvious from this statement and others that Dunkin understood his high capabilities; however, he self-selected a lower track to ensure further success and remained in control over his educational outcomes. Through his experiences in standard-level classes, Dunkin acknowledged his level of success and used it as internal motivation to self-select an honors-level class in future enrollment. Therefore, Dunkin experienced a great level of control over his educational outcomes and used it to disrupt his internal narrative.

Finally, Dia stated,

I think I can do well in any class I’m in, it just depends on the amount of effort I put in. most of them time if I enjoy the subject and the teacher I do my work especially if I like the assignments I’m given. if I don’t like the subject I definitely don’t do my work. I don’t like to do things I don’t want to.

In this covert narrative, Dia was genuine about the level of control she sought for the sake of being comfortable without extending a great amount of effort. She revealed that she sought control over whether she “enjoy[ed] the subject and the teacher” to ensure a positive educational experience. Therefore, she self-selected lower-tracked classes with the perception that they would yield desired outcomes; however, the covert narrative expressed here indicated that she would continue to perpetuate division and inequalities in her life.

### Recognition

Three (50%) standard-level students covertly stated that evading recognition was a factor of internal motivation in self-selecting lower tracks. In this case, standard-level students evaded positive recognition and covertly shared that they did not enjoy having accomplishments

recognized by others and/or receiving positive or negative attention from outside sources.

Specifically, Theo stated,

I honestly think I belong in standard but some others believe I should go higher. I don't like it because some friends seem happy for me while others are kind of mean about it and say things like, 'You're only in standard to make the rest of us look bad.' I know it should be my decision but others seem to influence that decision.

Here, Theo shared the covert narrative of being uncomfortable with receiving any sort of perceived recognition from outside sources for academic accomplishments. She reflected on specific instances of discomfort as outside sources disrupted her internal narratives. Because her internal narrative reflected that she “belong[ed] in standard,” the social conflict of the perceived recognition forced her into a position of uncertainty. Although she was recognized by others as having the perceived qualities to select higher-tracked classes, she evaded recognition and attention and perpetuated the narrative of inequality by self-selecting lower-tracked classes. Moreover, later she explicitly stated, “I also fear that if I tell people that I'm in honors they will think I'm showing off.” This overt statement solidified the notion that Theo evaded recognition out of “fear” that others will “think [she was] showing off.” Because of these internal factors of motivation, she continued to be complicit in her own production of disparities.

Similarly, Angel shared negative sentiments in her attitudes toward honors-level classes, which negatively impacted her desire to be recognized as a member of the opposing group of honors-level students. Specifically, she stated, “I feel like I'd be less motivated in an honors class because I'll feel as though I don't belong.” Angel expressed feelings of self-doubt in that she did not want to be recognized as a part of a group that she did not perceive herself as being similar to according to her internal narrative. Therefore, she dismissed the issue of her negative self-

concept and attributed her reasoning to lack of motivation; whereas, Angel also evaded a sense of recognition with a group that is incompatible with her internal narrative. This indicated that she did not desire to be recognized by outside sources as similar to peers that she perceived conflict with. Therefore, she accepted division and inequality between her and those outside sources.

Finally, Jean did not “refer to [himself] as smart” and therefore evaded recognition associated with groups perceived as such. In this covert narrative, Jean did not believe that he was worthy of receiving positive recognition in associating himself with populations perceived as intelligent; therefore, he used this as an implicit internal motivation to self-select lower tracked classes. Overall, because each student attributed feelings of negativity with the unwanted recognition or attention, they were less likely to put themselves at risk of encountering such, which was a factor of internal motivation in self-selecting lower academic tracks.

### Curiosity and Collaboration

Zero (0.0%) standard-level students stated that a desire for curiosity and collaboration in the content was a factor of internal motivation in self-selecting higher- or lower-tracks. During the coding process, no key quotes were identified as expressing a narrative that supported a desire for curiosity and collaboration in the English Language Arts content. Although Theo did state that she enjoyed reading and writing, and other attributed successes in standard-level English Language Arts to being “easy,” no key quotes supported the desire for curiosity or collaboration as a factor of internal motivation to self-select any given level of academic track. It was the position of the researcher to problematize this finding as it was disturbing that zero

standard-level students in the sample population indicated that the subject grabbed their attention or created a stimulant for their brain. The silent narratives that were expressed through this position of disinterest in learning should be of concern to all parties involved. The lack of internal motivation for love of learning and collaboration with others was disheartening. This reinforced the instructional inequities that are prevalent in lower tracked classes due to the fact that students did not attribute them to being of interest. It was the position of the researcher that the content teacher should be responsible for inciting curiosity and collaboration in the class; therefore, there may be a correlation between no students indicating a desire or experience with such and the standard-level teachers' desire to create such an environment for learning.

#### Honors-Level Students' External Motivations Toward Higher and Lower Academic Tracks

##### Teacher Influences

Five (83.3%) honors-level students covertly indicated that positive teacher influence was a factor of external motivation in self-selecting higher tracks. Most honors-level students reported that they had positive experiences with honors-level teachers, and unfavorable perceptions about standard-level teachers, which served as a significant factor of external motivation for honors-level students to select higher tracks.

Specifically, Julia stated, "I've never had a standard teacher before. But I feel they may not try as hard." Interestingly, Julia's perception of standard-level teachers did not seem to be founded on substantial evidence as she did not report that she was ever enrolled in a lower-tracked class. However, her negative perception of standard-level teachers coupled with her implicit bias against standard-level classes suggested that this was a significant external factor of

motivation for self-selecting honors-level classes. Julia covertly indicated that she believed honors-level teachers put additional effort toward their profession by indirectly comparing them to standard-level teachers. Therefore, the narrative suggested that Julia used her perceptions of teacher influence as an external motivating factor to self-select higher level tracks, further perpetuating divisions between higher and lower tracked classes.

Furthermore, James shared that “I feel as if honors teachers get more involved with students and motivate the students to perform well. While standard teachers tend to do just what is required of them.” Because of James’ internal motivations to seek challenges and recognition, he was drawn to honors-level teachers because of their perceived level of involvement and motivation. This was furthered with the implicit negative bias against standard-level teachers and the perception that they “tend to do just what is required of them.” Both positive and negative perceptions of the influence of the teacher functioned as a factor of external motivation for James to self-select a higher track, which added to the narrative of deficit for standard-level classes.

Similarly, Bob stated, “I think that I have a better relationship with my honors level teachers than my standard level teachers (except band) because of how they interact with me in class.” Bob’s narrative of perceived positive relationships with his honors-level teachers suggested that it was a major motivation in his selection of higher-tracked classes. Because Bob perceived that honors-level teachers influenced him more positively because of their interactions, it served as another example of the instructional inequities between higher and lower tracked classes, which furthered the narrative of deficit from a position of power.

Brittney stated, “to me personally I think that my honors teachers are more motivated to help kids out and they push the kids to reach outside of their comfort zone” which supported the

finding that positive teacher influence factors into her motivation to self-select honors-level classes. Brittney used the term “motivated” which indicated that she internalized this quality and used it as a factor of external motivation to seek future experiences with this desired quality. Because Brittney expressed an affinity to positive educational experiences and outcomes, she used her perceived positive attitudes towards honors-level teachers as a factor in self-selecting higher-level tracks.

Furthermore, Billy stated “I personally believe that teachers put more effort in when teaching an honors class because they can tell that the students want a challenge and want to learn more than the basic level standard class.” Because of Billy’s perception of honors-level teachers’ increased effort, challenge, and instructional quality, he supported the covert narrative of positive influence with teachers; therefore, he was externally motivated to select higher level tracks. This further suggested the significance of instructional inequalities of standard-level classes.

Finally, Emily stated, “I feel like Honors teachers somewhat care more about your grades, they know you signed up for honors to go the extra mile so that is what they expect from you, so if you're not excelling in that class they may encourage you more than another teacher.” The positive perception of honors-level teachers’ consideration for grades and enforcement of higher expectations served as a motivating factor in her decision to select higher-level tracks. Overall, this was attributed to the position of power that honors-level classes are typically afforded by having the most experienced teachers, which resulted in educational inequities for marginalized groups of students on the other end of the spectrum.

### Familial Influences

Four (66.7%) honors-level students covertly indicated that positive familial influence was a factor of external motivation in self-selecting higher tracks. Positive familial influences are one of the most significant sources of external motivation that a student can attribute success to. With this, James cited his source of external motivation to his dad, saying that “my dad definitely shaped my thoughts as he has always pushed me to be great. I also feel like I have something to prove to him” and further acknowledging, “I need to follow in his footsteps.” Even though James was identified as Economically Disadvantaged which put him at greater risk for underachievement, because he was greatly impacted by familial influences, he was motivated to self-select honors-level classes to please his father. In addition, James specifically shared that “I also want to make my grandparents proud to have another successful member in the family.” He had various sources of external motivation relating to familial influences for which he explicitly self-selected higher tracks.

In addition, Bob shared, “adults perceive me as more intelligent because of my honors classes and the grades I have in my classes because it makes me seem more motivated and responsible.” The most significant adults, aside from teachers, that Bob would likely attribute motivation to self-select higher tracks would be family. Bob enjoyed being recognized as an “intelligent,” “motivated,” and “responsible” person by adults, including family members. This positive external influence of familial perceptions motivated Bob to self-select higher tracked classes to continue to reinforce desired perceptions.

Conversely, Billy overtly stated, “my dad sort of forced me to take at least 1 honors class” which explicitly led to the assumption that familial influences were a significant external



motivating factor in selecting higher-level classes. This overt source of familial influence directly impacted Billy's external motivation to self-select higher level classes. This was significantly beneficial for Billy's educational outcomes as he reported that he enjoyed enrolling in higher tracked classes and received other benefits from doing so. Therefore, familial influence acted as a significant external motivating factor for Billy to seek higher level classes.

Furthermore, Brittney was overtly able to acknowledge the overt narrative of familial influence:

The factors that really helped me gain the mentality to lean towards more honors and AP classes are income, culture, family and politics. My dad has had a decent job for a long time and the ability to have money for food, learning resources, extracurricular activities etc. is the sole reason why I am fortunate to do what I do. As for culture, my parents have been through so much through their childhood and passed on opportunities in their lifetime so their mentality is to make sure their kids don't have to pass up any opportunities or goals due to a lack of resources whether it be physical or personal guidance.

Brittney was aware of the external motivating factors which directed her to make positive decisions about her education. For example, she attributed the socioeconomic success of her family, namely her father, to being "fortunately to do what I do." She understood that her family was the biggest influence on her educational decisions, including selecting higher-tracked classes. She graciously and beautifully equated her positive educational experiences to her parents and the fact that they "passed on opportunities in their lifetimes" to allow their kids to meet their goals. She purposely acknowledged the influences that her family had on her educational decisions and mentioned they gave her "personal guidance." This was a powerful overt narrative as to the incredible impact that family discourse has on students as an external motivating factor. The external influences of family benefitted honors-level students in their educational experiences and outcomes, and positively impacted their self-concept.

## Peer Influences

Five (83.3%) honors-level students covertly indicated that positive peer influence was a factor of external motivation in self-selecting higher tracks. Although honors-level students supported narratives that cited both positive and negative peer comments, the perceptions of their peers served as an external motivating factor to self-select honors-level classes. For example, James stated, “I feel as my peers could view me as a smarter student and would be more trustworthy of me if I take honors classes.” Here, James directly related the perception that he would be identified as more intelligent and trustworthy by selecting higher tracked classes, which supported that his peers explicitly influenced his motivation level. James overtly identified specific qualities that he subscribed to that indicated perceived differences between peers and cited it as an external motivation for selecting higher level classes.

Furthermore, Bob shared, “I think that peers... perceive me as more intelligent because of my honors classes and the grades I have in my classes because it makes me seem more motivated and responsible.” This covert narrative explicitly supported the notion that Bob’s highly regarded perceptions of his peers in his decisions to self-select higher leveled tracks in order to “seem more motivated and responsible.” His perceived understandings of his peers correlated to his decision to seek higher leveled classes to reinforce desired external perceptions. Like James, Bob shared similar ideas about the overt differences in peer perceptions and used this as an source of influence to associate himself with the desired qualities.

To continue, Billy stated, “I think that if you take a higher level class in anything that your peers... would be proud of you.” Billy supported the overt narrative finding that peer influences had a significant impact on level on external level of motivation as he sought for

outside influences to be “proud” of him. He used this perception as a positive external motivation to self-select higher level tracks and perpetuate positive educational outcomes.

Conversely, Brittney stated two conflicting narratives beginning with “I don't think my peers would judge me based on the classes I take. I know people who are very hard working but just take a while to learn things as fast as others and that's completely okay.” Here, Brittney overtly stated that she did not attribute her level of motivation based on perceived judgement from peers. She agreed that she does not come from a place of judgement; however, the conflicting narrative lay in her comment that “I don't think standard ELA art classes are for me just taking into account the amount of hard work I put into everything I do.” The conflict was present in her associating lower-tracked classes with a lower work ethic, deriving from her perceptions of peers which have inexplicitly impacted her internal narrative. So, although, Brittney reported that she did not feel judgement from peers, she admitted that she avoided negative judgement from peers because of her perceptions of their qualities compared to her own. Essentially, because Brittney was in a position of power in the higher-tracked classes, she did not acknowledge the possibility of her peers associating negative judgement, which she sought to avoid. Therefore, it was suggested that Brittney had a high regard for peer influence which impacted her selection of honors-level classes.

Similarly, Emily stated, “I believe kids who take honors versus standard are automatically granted to be ‘more smart’ by assumption.” Because Emily desired her peers’ perceptions to confirm the notion that she was intelligent, she self-selected to take higher tracked classes which indicated that she regarded the inexplicit influence of peers on her external motivations. She subscribed herself to the notion that she desired to be perceived as more

intelligent than her standard-level peers; therefore, she was externally motivated to meet those perceptions. This furthered the narrative of deficit because, conversely, Emily reinforced the perception that lower tracked classes were less intelligent. This perpetuated division and inequality between higher and lower tracks.

### Academic and/or Career Influences

Three (50%) honors-level students overtly indicated that perceived academic and/or career benefits were a factor of external motivation in self-selecting higher tracks. James, Bob, and Billy overtly expressed external benefits which included the desire to “impress colleges,” receive a “GPA boost,” improve their “college transcript,” and “be able to learn more to be able to succeed in life.” School systems attempt students to provide external motivating factors through grades and transcripts; however, interestingly, only three students cited this as reasoning for their selection of honors-level classes. This suggested that, although it was a point of consideration for some students, a large proportion of students attribute other external factors of motivation, such as teacher influences, familial influences, and peer influences to the selection process.

### Standard-Level Students’ External Motivations Toward Higher and Lower Academic Tracks

#### Teacher Influences

Standard-level students expressed several factors of internal motivation through both overt and covert narratives that allowed the researcher to identify key reasons why they self-selected lower academic tracks. Five (83.3%) standard-level students covertly indicated that teacher influence was a factor of external motivation in self-selecting lower tracks. Most

standard-level students reported that they had unfavorable perceptions about standard-level teachers, or felt indifferently toward teacher influence, which ironically served as a significant factor of external motivation for standard-level students to select lower tracks. In discussing the inexplicit influence of teachers on motivation, Theo and Jean overtly stated negative perceptions about standard-level teachers as opposed to honors-level teachers. Specifically, Theo shared concerns about conflicts with honors-level teachers because of perceived personality differences. For example, Theo stated, “my personality is chill and laid back, but I still do my work. I fear how that will go over with honors level teachers.” Here, Theo covertly expressed that she believes honors-level teachers maintained a level of expectation about personality and behavior in higher tracked classes. She expressed fear about the idea that she would not meet the high expectations of the teachers. This reinforced the division and inequity in her perceptions of herself in relation to her teachers. Because she did not have confidence in her ability to fulfil high expectations, she inadvertently remained complicit in the production of disparities based on perceived notions. Although Theo did not overtly express negative perceptions of standard-level teachers, her misguided perception that she was fearful about not meeting high expectations reinforced the idea that she sought comfort in lower tracked classes due to lower expectations. Therefore, this was an inexplicit factor of external motivation for Theo to self-select lower tracked classes.

Furthermore, Jean expressed, “I feel that maybe teachers would enjoy teaching honor classes more because the kids there would actually respect them. That would reflect back on the students since the teacher would be more kind and nourishing to the class.” Here, Jean was overtly expressing positive perceptions of honors-level teachers as opposed to standard-level

teachers. Unfortunately, this perception perpetuated Jean's negative internal narrative that perhaps he was undeserving of "kind and nourishing" teachers. This resulted in a negative educational outcome for Jean as it served as a factor of external motivation in his selection of lower tracked classes, which indicated further division.

Conversely, instead of expressing positive or negative perceptions of honors- and standard-level teachers, three (60.0%) of the five standard-level students reported covert feelings of indifference toward relationships with teachers. This supported the findings that a proportion of the standard-level sample population did not value of teacher influence in their process of selecting higher or lower tracks. Instead, they have not reported experiences of significant, impactful relationships with teachers, which led to a lack of external motivation to select higher level tracks. Specifically, Dunkin stated, "a teacher is a teacher it is up to the student or the teacher to connect and interact with each other even if it seems that a higher level teacher would be more strict, I do not think that is the case." Here, Dunkin covertly added to the narrative of indifference toward having meaningful relationships with teachers, which was likely the reason he has not disrupted his internal narrative of comfortability

In addition, Angel stated, "I feel as though there won't be any difference because some of the teachers are the same for standard and honors." Angel's perception of teachers stemmed from a position of ignorance. Angel overtly attributed all differences between honors- and standard-level classes to peers and other explicit and implicit internal motivations. However, part of her perceived challenges stemmed from the instructional inequities she may have faced but has yet to acknowledge. The lack of positive, meaningful relationships with teachers led to a lack of influence and result of negative educational outcomes.

In addition, Dia reflected, “I’m not sure, whether I like my teachers and get along with them is up to them. typically, I’m friendly towards all to teachers but depending on their personalities I’m closer with some more than others.” Dia furthered the narrative of ignorance by minimizing the amount of control she held over her relationships with teachers and the level of influence they had on her motivation to select higher level tracks. Therefore, allowed herself to perpetuate inequalities by refusing to control her perceived relationships with teachers.

### Familial Influences

One (16.7%) standard-level students covertly indicated that familial influence was an implicit external motivating factor in self-selecting of lower tracks. It was of great concern that only one standard-level student cited familial influences, as they are one of the most significant sources of external motivation that a student can attribute success to, as evidenced by the honors-level sample population. With this, Theo stated, “I feel like family also is a big factor. If my family told me that they thought I wasn't smart enough for honors then I wouldn't take honors.” The overt narrative revealed that Theo valued familial influences as a factor of motivation. However, the covert narrative implied that Theo did not receive positive familial influences. Instead, she only described the effects of negative familial influences, such as reinforcing Theo’s internal narrative of deficiency. Essentially, because Theo did not report receiving feedback from her family, she resulted in perpetuating the narrative of deficit by self-selecting a lower track. Furthermore, Theo shared, “I feel if I tell my mom I'm in standard she will be disappointed in me but if I take an honors class she'll be happy.” The fact that Theo expressed assumptions in her family’s feedback indicated that she was unsure of her family’s perceptive, which led to Theo

not having the support or influence to disrupt her internal narrative. Perhaps if Theo received positive familial influences in the form of direct feedback, she would have had the courage to disrupt her internal narrative and seek risks toward higher level tracks.

The startlingly unfortunate result that five other standard-level students did not overtly or covertly mention familial influence as a factor of external motivation added to the narrative of deficit in the form of familial inequity. Because a large proportion of the standard-level sample population's parents did not earn a high school or college degree supports the notion that they are academically underperforming in relation to their honors-level peers. These findings were concerning as they continued to reinforce systems of privilege over marginalized groups, including Economically Disadvantaged students. Interestingly, although these students had equal opportunity to self-select higher academic tracks, they have chosen not to because of the lack of familial awareness and support. Because of familial inequities, it was suggested that standard-level students were not receiving enough levels of support from adult family members. Because of the silent narrative, it was apparent that standard-level students were at a greater disadvantage plagued with division and inequities due to a lack of familial influence, which was an implicit reason why these students self-select lower level tracks.

### Peer Influences

Six (100%) standard-level students covertly indicated that negative peer influence was a factor of external motivation in self-selecting lower tracks. Although standard-level students supported narratives that cited both positive and negative peer comments, the perceptions of their peers compounded by their self-concept served as an external motivating factor to self-select



standard-level classes. For example, Theo stated, “Some of my peers will say I need to be in honors if I'm in standard and others just don't care.” Theo acknowledged her peers’ perceptions but did not overtly attribute it to her self-selection. However, analysis of other narrative structures she shared indicated that because of her negative self-concept paired with lack of familial influence, she resulted in allowing an implicit power struggle to overcome her ability to select higher track levels.

Furthermore, Jean stated “There is stereotyping in school. People with higher level classes are seen as smart or intelligent. Sometimes they will look down on the people who are not.” This supported Jean’s internal narrative of self-doubt attributed to his negative perception of self, including the overt statement, “I wouldn’t consider myself smart.” Therefore, the influences of peers reinforced Jean’s negative self-concept and he was unable to disrupt his internal narrative; resulting in self-selecting lower tracked classes. Jean allowed peer influences to negatively impact his educational experiences and outcomes, which further perpetuated the narrative of deficit through division and inequality.

In addition, Milton shared, “I do think the level classes you are in affect how people look at you and think of you nowadays people are judged so fast over anything and if you are in certain classes you are perceived as smart or dumb really no middle.” According the Milton’s covert narrative, the reinforced idea that his peers judged him as being “dumb.” Therefore, these external motivations result in negative educational outcomes because he did not seek to disrupt their external narratives. Instead, he remained comfortable and did not risk altering external narratives; thus, he continued to self-select lower level tracks.

Similarly, Dunkin shared, “Yes, the first thing people would believe is that a student is not as smart as them since they are taking a lower - level class.” Unfortunately, like Milton, Dunkin allowed negative external narratives to serve as an influence in his decision to self-select lower level tracks. Dunkin did not disrupt that narrative of deficit in lower level classes; instead, he added to it.

Furthermore, Angel stated, “Yes because some people believe you are dumber if you enroll in a standard class.” Each of these covert narratives indicated that peer influences reinforce negative perceptions of self, which acted as factors of external motivation for these students to self-select lower-tracked classes. Furthermore, as stated before, when Angel referred to honors-level students as “stuck up” about their level of intelligence, she reinforced the idea that she did not want to associate herself with that group. Based on her perceptions of her peers, it influenced her to select a lower-level track. This perpetuated the division and inequality of higher and lower tracked classes.

Conversely, Dia stated “the people I know don’t judge me on the classes I take because my teachers and peers that know me know I’m really smart just incredibly lazy”. Therefore, although Dia overtly stated that she is intelligent, she subscribed to the quality of being lazy, which was a reinforced perception of standard-level classes. Therefore, Dia also supported the finding that because of negative self-concept and reinforced external peer influences, standard-level students were more likely to self-select lower level tracks.

### Academic and/or Career Influences

Three (50%) standard-level students indicated that perceived academic and/or career benefits were a factor of external motivation in self-selecting higher tracks. Theo, Jean and Dunkin cited a desire to improve “grades and GPA” as well as “get ready for higher learning.” School systems attempt to provide students with external motivating factors through grades and transcripts; however, interestingly, only three students cited this as reasoning for their selection of honors-level classes in the future. However, findings suggested that perceived academic and/or career benefits were not significantly motivational as the three students continued to be complicit in the production of disparities in their current standard-level enrollment despite knowing about perceived benefits.

Furthermore two (16.7%) standard-level students overtly indicated that they believed they did not benefit from perceived academic and/or career benefits in higher-level tracks; therefore, acting as a factor of external motivation to self-select lower-level tracks. Although Duncan agreed that he was interested in selecting higher-level tracks in the future, he stated that

I have and I feel it was an okay class to keep a good grade in but I do not feel I have gained any experience in it besides learning new types of literary elements and further developing my literary skills.

Therefore, although he acknowledged certain academic benefits, such as improved grades impacting his GPA, he did not find value in the educational experience itself in honors-level classes. He overtly stated that he learned new content about literacy, but he felt indifferently toward the value added to his educational experience. Therefore, this factor was a motivating force in his selection of lower level academic tracks.

Furthermore, Milton stated, “I would not say I learned anything special in honors that I didn't learn in this class [standard] this year.” Milton’s overt narrative suggested that he did not find value in the educational experiences of honors-level classes, which resulted in a negative outcome and influence on self-selected tracking. Therefore, the findings suggested that for some standard-level students, perceived academic and/or career benefits did not serve as a significant factor of motivation to self-select higher tracks.

### Educational Implications

Further understanding of ideas experiences, attitudes, and motivations of 10th grade English Language Arts students, who self-select higher and lower academic tracks will increase personal and professional understandings of how tracking impacts the education system, as well as individual classrooms and students’ perceptions. The increase in socioeconomic diversity and inequities within the student population highlights the need for more effective system of educational organization and awareness in-service within teacher professional learning initiatives. Thus, teacher professional learning initiatives that recognize the overt and covert narratives of secondary English Language Arts students toward honors- and standard-level classes will be better able to equip teachers for entrance into the challenging classroom environment, in terms of both classroom management and teaching. In terms of research, the study helps to uncover critical areas in the educational process that remain unexplained. Thus, a new perspective on students’ educational experiences and teacher awareness may be attained.

## Advocating for a Unifying System of Educational Change

The theme of advocating for a unifying system of educational change is displayed in a study by Loveless (1998) developed the theme of advocating for a unifying system of educational change by outlining the following guidelines:

- 1) Schools must be granted autonomy to decide grouping policies. Principals, teachers, and parents are in the best position to craft the grouping policies of any particular school, not policy makers many miles away.
- 2) Tracked schools should work to improve themselves, primarily by ensuring that low track students receive a challenging curriculum that emphasizes academic progress.
- 3) Untracked schools must alleviate the fears of parents, especially the parents of high achieving pupils, that detracking is more concerned with pursuing a dubious social agenda than substantive academic goals. (Loveless, Making sense of the tracking and ability grouping debate, 1998)

Through substantial quantitative research, Loveless was able to analyze effects of tracking policies on students and determine several elements of change for future policies within the education system. The suggested changes promote school autonomy, room for improvement, and easing fears of parents of high-tracked students.

Oakes (1987) conducted a qualitative research study to analyze various contexts that influence tracking practices and “suggest[s] that tracking profoundly influences the day-to-day conduct of schools and reflects assumptions about how schools should respond to student diversity” (Tracking in secondary schools: A contextual perspective, p. 129). Essentially, Oakes’ research lead to suggestions for changes within the educational system such as rethinking tracking as a fundamental school process. Oakes outlined several questions for consideration of future changes, such as “Does it work? How? For whom? Toward what ends?” for leaders in the educational field to answer through experience in school organization (Tracking in secondary schools: A contextual perspective, p. 149).

Stanley and Venzant Chambers (2018) conducted a qualitative research study with seven black students to understand their personal experiences and insights about tracking, and “findings revealed that students contribute nuanced perspectives on complex educational reform issues, such as tracking, and provide powerful insights that should be considered in school reform conversations” (Tracking myself: African American high school students talk about the effects of curricular differentiation, p. 1). The discussions with students indicated that students suggested a more embracing, student-centered environment, a greater focus on individual student strengths, a stronger community of students, and increased community in school (Stanley & Venzant Chambers, 2018, p. 4). Overall, each of these studies demonstrated a need and proposed solutions to changes within the educational system, which further developed the theme. The relevance of the harmful effects that tracking imposes on students’ self-efficacy highlights the needs for education reform to ensure that practice reflect the genuine purpose of the system.

Although previous research has not been enough in bringing about significant change, educational experts agree that the negative impacts that tracking has on students’ self-efficacy should prompt leaders to examine new alternatives which demonstrate that:

- all students can benefit from the thinking-skills and enrichment activities often offered only to those labeled "gifted" and "talented";
- high expectations for everyone can be communicated through school routines and classroom techniques, which result in increased student effort and higher achievement for all;
- cooperative learning and other innovative teaching approaches can deepen academic learning for all students while promoting self-esteem;
- meaningful hands-on learning activities organized around themes can help students perfect basic skills and teach them to synthesize information from different sources, apply knowledge, and solve problems; and/or schools can successfully peel off the bottom levels of a grouping hierarchy courses labeled "basic" or "general" and expose everyone to grade-level textbooks, activities, and expectations while providing extra support for those who need it. (Wheelock, 1992, p. 13)

Several research studies developed an outline of positive ways to advocate for a unifying system of educational change. Educational leaders should heed the suggestions of researchers to promote changes within the system to benefit students. Furthermore, student perspectives should be considered to promote voice within educational change.

### Recommendations for Future Study

This study examined motivation through the overt and covert narratives of 10th grade English Language Arts students, who self-select higher and lower academic tracks. Further research can be implemented to add to the information reported and to provide further discussion. The researcher could examine a wider sample size that more accurately portrays all students. This study showed only a small portion of what could be done when examining ideas, experiences, attitudes, and motivations. Researchers could expand on this study and examine a wider sample size, or, perhaps deliberately expand the inclusion criteria to include members of specific races, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The researcher could complete a longitudinal study that explores the impacts of teacher influences to support lower-tracked students' motivation to self-select higher academic tracks. Future research could also include examining the influence of school climate and teachers' perceptions regarding higher and lower tracks. Another further research could include a Foucauldian lens to examine how Michel Foucault's theories about power, and the relationship between power and knowledge, as well as his ideas relating to social constructs influence teachers and students learning, pedagogy, and decision making (Deacon, 2006).

**APPENDIX A: UNIVERSITY IRB APPROVAL LETTER**





UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

Institutional Review Board  
FWA00000351  
IRB00001138Office of Research  
12201 Research Parkway  
Orlando, FL 32826-3246

APPROVAL

April 24, 2019

Dear Elsie Olan:

On 4/24/2019, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	A Narrative Research Study of Self-Selected Tracking on Motivation in 10th Grade English Language Arts Classes
Investigator:	Elsie Olan
IRB ID:	STUDY00000442
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consent Form- Parent for Child, Category: Consent Form;</li> <li>• Questionnaire Instrument, Category: Survey / Questionnaire;</li> <li>• Protocol, Category: IRB Protocol;</li> </ul>

The IRB approved the protocol on 4/24/2019.

In conducting this protocol, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within the IRB system.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or [irb@ucf.edu](mailto:irb@ucf.edu). Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Racine Jacques, Ph.D.  
Designated Reviewer

**APPENDIX B: DISTRICT IRB APPROVAL LETTER**



WALT GRIFFIN  
Superintendent

**Educational Support Center**  
400 E. Lake Mary Boulevard  
Sanford, Florida 32773-7127  
Phone: (407) 320-0000  
Fax: (407) 320-0281

**SCHOOL BOARD**

TINA CALDERONE, Ed.D.  
*Chairman*

KAREN ALMOND  
*Vice Chairman*

KRISTINE KRAUS  
*Board Member*

AMY PENNOCK  
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April 22, 2019

Ms. Audra Greuel  
4000 Central Florida Blvd.  
Orlando, FL 32816

Dear Ms. Greuel,

I am in receipt of the proposal and supplemental information that you submitted for permission to conduct research in the Seminole County Public Schools. Thank you for adjusting your study components to remove impact to students and teachers' instructional time.

You are granted permission to conduct the study described herein, *A Narrative Research Study of Self-Selected Tracking on Motivation in 10<sup>th</sup> Grade English Language Arts Classes*, at Lake Brantley High School, pending submission to this office of the UCF IRB approval document.

Your first order of business is to confirm that Dr. Daniel agrees that your study may be conducted on her campus. We would appreciate you sharing a copy of your results with this office.

Best of luck!

Respectfully,

Anna-Marie Cote, Ed.D.

Deputy Superintendent, Instructional Excellence and Equity

cc. Ms. Mike Gaudreau, Executive Director, High Schools  
Dr. Trent Daniel, Principal, Lake Brantley High School

## **APPENDIX C: SAMPLE CONSENT FORM**



**Title of research study:** A Narrative Research Study of Self-Selected Tracking on Motivation in 10th Grade English Language Arts Classes

**Principal Investigator:** Elsie L. Olan, Ph.D.

**Other Investigators:** Audra L. Greuel

**How to Return this Consent Form:** You are provided with two copies of this consent form. If you give consent for your child to participate in the research, please sign one copy and return it to the researcher and keep the other copy for your records.

**Key Information:** The following is a short summary of this study to help you decide whether to be a part of this study. More detailed information is listed later in this form.

***Why is my child being invited to take part in a research study?***

Your child is being invited take part in a research study because he or she is a 10th grade English Language Arts student at Lake Brantley High School who is at least 14 years of age and under age 18.

***Why is this research being done?***

This study seeks to explore motivation through the implicit narratives of 10th grade English Language Arts students, who self-select higher and lower academic tracks.

***How long will the research last and what will my child need to do?***

We expect that your child will be in this research study for one month.

Your child will be asked to respond to an unstructured questionnaire format of ten questions that should take approximately 30 minutes. The questionnaire will be conducted in-person. The nature of a questionnaire requires interpretation and analysis throughout the questionnaire, as well as after.

More detailed information about the study procedures can be found under ***“What happens if I say yes, I want my child to be in this research?”***

***Is there any way being in this study could be bad for my child?***

*The expected risks are minimal and do not exceed those found in everyday life.*

***Will being in this study help my child in any way?***

There are no benefits to your child from your taking part in this research. We cannot promise any benefits to others from your taking part in this research.

***What happens if I do not want my child to be in this research?***

Participation in research is completely voluntary. You can decide to have your child participate or not to participate.

Your alternative to participating in this research study is to not participate.

***Detailed Information:*** The following is more detailed information about this study in addition to the information listed above.

***What should I know about a research study?***

- Someone will explain this research study to you and your child.
- Whether or not you allow your child to take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to allow your child to take part.
- You can agree to allow your child to take part and later change your mind.
- Your decision will not be held against you or your child.
- You can ask all the questions you want before you decide.

***Who can I talk to?***

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt your child, talk to the research team: contact the ***faculty advisor, Dr. Elsie L. Olan, Principal Investigator, School of Teacher Education, by email at [elsie.olan@ucf.edu](mailto:elsie.olan@ucf.edu), or Audra Greuel, Co-Investigator, School of Teacher Education, at (321) 446-9530 or by email at [audragreuel@knights.ucf.edu](mailto:audragreuel@knights.ucf.edu).***

This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (“IRB”). You may talk to them at 407-823-2901 or [irb@ucf.edu](mailto:irb@ucf.edu) if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your child’s rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

***How many people will be studied?***

We expect twelve (12) people will participate in this research study.

***What happens if I say yes, I want my child to be in this research?***

The questionnaires will take place at Lake Brantley High School in building 7, room 111 after school hours. The information attained through research participant questionnaires will remain confidential with no reference to name and institution, but demographic data such as academic year, racial identity, gender identity, description of family’s demographics, and academic plans will be recorded by the researcher to identify emerging themes among the research participants.

All necessary subject identifiers from data files will be removed. Data files stored electronically will be encrypted on a password protected computer, which only the

researcher has access to. Written notes and physical information will be stored in a physically separate and secure location from the electronic data files and associated with the data files through a key code that is also stored in a separate and secure location. All de-identified data will be deleted after five (5) years. The signed consent forms will be stored for a minimum of five (5) years. Questionnaire sessions will be audio-recorded and transcribed. Audio files will be deleted after five (5) years. Research participants can still take part in the research, even if they do not want to be audio-recorded.

***What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?***

You can choose to have your child leave the research at any time it will not be held against you or your child.

***What happens to the information collected for the research?***

Efforts will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your child's personal information to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete secrecy. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the IRB and other representatives of this organization.

***If the research team uncovers abuse, neglect, or reportable diseases, this information may be disclosed to appropriate authorities.***

***Your child's information that are collected as part of this research will not be used or distributed for future research studies, even if all your child's identifiers are removed. All de-identified data will be deleted after five (5) years. The signed consent forms will be stored for a minimum of five (5) years. Questionnaire sessions will be audio-recorded and transcribed. Audio files will be deleted after five (5) years.***

### Signature Block for Children

Your signature documents your permission for the named child to take part in this research.

---

Printed name of child

---

Signature of parent or individual legally authorized to consent to the child's general medical care

---

Date

---

Printed name of parent or individual legally authorized to consent to the child's general medical care

- Parent
- Individual legally authorized to consent to the child's general medical care (See note below)



## **APPENDIX D: SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS**

1. What are your initials and academic year?
2. What level of English Language Arts are you currently enrolled in?
3. What race and gender do you identify with? How would you describe your family's socioeconomic status? What is the highest level of education your parents earned?
4. Please describe your plans for enrollment in English Language Arts next year.
  - a. What level of English Language Arts do you plan to enroll in (honors or standard)? Please explain.
5. Have you had any experiences in an honors-level English Language Arts class?
  - a. If so, how do you feel about these experiences and what do you think you learned from these experiences?
  - b. If not, why?
6. What are your attitudes toward standard-level English Language Arts classes? What are your attitudes toward honors-level English Language Arts classes?
  - a. What factors helped to shape these beliefs?
    - i. For example, culture, politics, media, family, or socioeconomic status (education, income, wealth, employment, and occupational status)?
  - b. How does talking about enrolling in either standard- or honors-level English Language Arts classes make you feel?
7. What are your concerns about enrolling in a standard-level class versus an honors-level class? Please explain.
8. Do you think there might be any differences in your relationships with standard- or honors-level teachers? If so, how?

9. Do you think that your peers and adults could perceive you in certain ways because of the level of English Language Arts class you enroll in? If so, how?
10. Do you feel prepared in succeeding in a standard-level class or an honors-level class, considering your current experiences? Please explain.

**APPENDIX E: TABLE 3**

Table 3: Key Quotes, Codes, and Categories for Current 10th Grade English Language Arts Honors Classes

Key Quotes	Codes	Categories
<p>Julia: “relatively easy”</p> <p>James: “standard isn't difficult enough to test my knowledge”</p> <p>James: “I like challenges”</p> <p>James: “My concerns about standard courses are that they might not push me or other students hard enough and they don't provide enough learning material”</p> <p>Bob: “more challenging work”</p> <p>Bob: “I am concerned that there is not enough challenging and stimulating work”</p> <p>Bob: “I feel prepared succeeding in honors level classes because of how my teacher has prepared me in terms of the amount and type of homework, amount of in class work and quizzes/tests and amount of participation in leadership”</p> <p>Brittney: “taught me how to think critically”</p> <p>Brittney: “The support and foundation I've had has helped me to conquer challenges inside and outside of the classroom”</p> <p>Brittney: “If I were in a lower level English class, I would try to do what I could to improve.</p> <p>Brittney: “if I took a standard-level class I feel like it would change my hard work ethic and make me become less willing to take the extra step for my education”</p> <p>Billy: “for me to take a standard class it wouldn't be challenging”</p> <p>Billy: “I have always taken a high-level English class and I feel prepared.”</p> <p>Emily: it goes faster”</p> <p>Emily: “I feel like my teachers have prepared me for my future endeavors in English III Honors because over this school year I have received a lot of work and given short amounts of time to complete it at times so I have learned to balance and get myself in line, I am prepared.”</p>	Challenge	Internal Motivation (Implicit)
<p>Brittney: “dig deeper to find truth and meanings”</p> <p>Brittney: “helped me to ‘think outside of the box’”</p>	Curiosity	
<p>Brittney: “collaborate in groups and voice my opinion”</p>	Cooperation	
<p>Julia: “I do believe that I have been set up to succeed by the teachers that I have had.”</p>	Control	

<p>James: “I do feel prepared to succeed in an honors level class.”</p> <p>Bob: “more freedom to work”</p> <p>Bob: “less micromanagement”</p> <p>Brittney: “responsible decision making in the future”</p> <p>Brittney: “I feel very prepared in succeeding in a standard-level class. I was fortunate to be in a school district that focused heavily on giving every child a good education.”</p> <p>Brittney: “I believe I am supposed to be nothing less than an honors student just considering the time that has been put into obtaining a good start to an education.”</p> <p>Billy: “Taking an English Honors language arts class makes me feel good”</p>		
<p>James: “I feel as if I could achieve what my dad could and be successful in school and hopefully become successful as an adult”</p> <p>James: “disappointed that I failed the class”</p> <p>James: “I find motivation in that now”</p> <p>Brittney: “great for my development not only as a student, but as a person”</p> <p>Billy: “I wouldn’t like it because I have always taken English Honors and done well”</p>	Recognition	
<p>James: “I find motivation in that now I need to try harder to impress colleges”</p> <p>James: “prefer to be able to learn more to be able to succeed in life”</p> <p>Bob: “there is no GPA boost”</p> <p>Billy: “honors looks better on your college transcript”</p>	Perceived Academic/Career Benefits	External Motivation (Explicit)
<p>Julia: “Kids would be too loud and make it a hard environment to focus in”</p> <p>Bob: “enjoyable experience”</p> <p>Brittney: “To me personally I think that my honors teachers are more motivated to help kids out and they push the kids to reach outside of their comfort zone.”</p> <p>Billy: “I personally believe that teachers put more effort in when teaching an honors class because they can tell that the students want a challenge and want to learn more than the basic level standard class”</p> <p>Emily: “honor students has more focused kids and kids who actually care about their grades”</p> <p>Emily: “standard English class is more disruptive and not many kids in standard take it too serious.”</p>	Perceived Learning Environment	

<p>Emily: "I think when enrolling in an honors class you should know it IS faster, and more in depth versus standard."</p>	
<p>Julia: "I've never had a standard teacher before. But I feel they may not try as hard"  Julia: "I do believe that there are some bias against people who are in standard classes and the stereotypical that they aren't smart."  James: "I feel as if honors teachers get more involved with students and motivate the students to perform well. While standard teachers tend to do just what is required of them."  Bob: "I think that I have a better relationship with my honors level teachers than my standard level teachers (except band) because of how they interact with me in class"  Brittney: "new social experiences"  Emily: "I feel like Honors teachers somewhat care more about your grades, they know you signed up for honors to go the extra mile so that is what they expect from you, so if you're not excelling in that class they may encourage you more than another teacher."</p>	<p>Teacher Influences</p>
<p>James: "My dad definitely shaped my thoughts as he has always pushed me to be great. I also feel like I have something to prove to him."  James: I need to follow in his footsteps."  James: "I also want to make my grandparents proud to have another successful member in the family."  Bob: "I think that peers and adults perceive me as more intelligent because of my honors classes and the grades I have in my classes because it makes me seem more motivated and responsible"  Brittney: This is partly because of my foundation as a child as well."  Brittney: "My parents disciplined me for bad behavior, and it helped shaped me as an adolescent to be responsible and have good character."  Brittney: "The factors that really helped me gain the mentality to lean towards more honors and AP classes are income, culture, family and politics. My dad has had a decent job for a long time and the ability to have money for food, learning resources, extracurricular activities etc. is the sole reason why I am fortunate to do what I do. As for culture, my parents have been through</p>	<p>Familial Influences</p>

so much through their childhood and passed on opportunities in their lifetime so their mentality is to make sure their kids don't have to pass up any opportunities or goals due to a lack of resources whether it be physical or personal guidance.”

Billy: “my dad sort of forced me to take at least 1 honors class”

Billy: “Yes I think that if you take a higher level class in anything that your peers and adults would be proud of you.”

Emily: “Yes I believe kids who take honors versus standard are automatically granted to be ‘More smart’ by assumption but in reality anyone can take an honors class if they have the work ethic.”

James: “I feel as my peers could view me as a smarter student and would be more trustworthy of me if I take honors classes.”

Bob: “I think that peers and adults perceive me as more intelligent because of my honors classes and the grades I have in my classes because it makes me seem more motivated and responsible”

Brittney: “I don't think my peers would judge me based on the classes I take. I know people who are very hard working but just take a while to learn things as fast as others and that's completely okay.”

Billy: “Yes I think that if you take a higher level class in anything that your peers and adults would be proud of you.”

Emily: “Yes I believe kids who take honors versus standard are automatically granted to be "More smart" by assumption but in reality anyone can take an honors class if they have the work ethic.”

Peer Influences



**APPENDIX F: TABLE 4**

Table 4: Key Quotes, Codes, and Categories for Current 10th Grade English Language Arts Standard Classes

Key Quotes	Codes	Categories
<p>Theo: “I feel like standard is for people who are more laid back and don't work. I also feel like people take it because they genuinely have troubles with English.”</p> <p>Theo: “In an honors class, it scares me how much work could be involved.”</p> <p>Theo: “A standard class seems easier to me and I don't have to worry about those things.”</p> <p>Theo: “In middle school I took honors English. I didn't take them 9th and 10th grade just because I ended all my middle school years with a C.”</p> <p>Theo: “In middle school I didn't try.”</p> <p>Theo: “I think I could definitely succeed in a standard level class but I'm not sure about an honors level class. The work load and pace, to me, is completely different”</p> <p>Jean: “I feel that I would struggle or lag behind. That I would be miserable trying to catch up.”</p> <p>Jean: “I don't think it's up to how smart you are. It's up to how much you're willing to push yourself to strive to get better. Maybe work in your free time. Study”</p> <p>Jean: “I feel that I would struggle or lag behind. That I would be miserable trying to catch up.”</p> <p>Jean: “My point of view of standard classes is that's where kids who are just average go. the kids who don't push themselves or are just mentally challenged. Honor classes are where intelligent people go. People who actually care about their education.”</p> <p>Milton: “I believe standard classes are more busy work then on your own pace”</p> <p>Dunkin: “I feel like standard - level English classes are even less challenging than honors and the only students who take it are the ones who want to relieve the stresses of more homework on top of the other higher - level classes.”</p> <p>Dunkin: “From now on I would rather be in an honors level class because it is faster.”</p> <p>Angel: “It seems to be the same, but a little bit slower. I do think I learned from these experiences”</p> <p>Angel: “I feel as though I wouldn't be prepared for neither honors nor standard because my level of motivation is already very low”</p>	<p>Challenge</p>	<p>Internal Motivation (Implicit)</p>

<p>Dia: "I think standard is a relatively easy, but I don't like doing paperwork. honors are a bit more strict with deadlines and what the course includes and there's typically more work"</p> <p>Dia: "in standard you're not around people who challenge your thinking and people don't always understand and tends to slow down the class and lesson plans"</p>	
None	Curiosity
None	Cooperation
<p>Theo: "It taught me that if I want to succeed then I actually need to try and do my best."</p> <p>Theo: "It also brought to my attention that I really like to read and write."</p> <p>Jean: "Talking about it makes me feel more confident about it."</p> <p>Milton: "I enjoy standard level more than I did honors,"</p> <p>Milton: "I don't have any concerns I'd rather be placed in standard"</p> <p>Milton: "yes I do I've really never had any trouble gliding through English in my eyes it would be harder to fail then pass"</p> <p>Dunkin: "Yes, since I am already succeeding in this class now and it already seems easy even though I am taking Advanced Placement"</p> <p>Dia: "I haven't taken an English honors class"</p> <p>Dia: "I think I can do well in any class I'm in, it just depends on the amount of effort I put it in. most of them time if I enjoy the subject and the teacher I do my work especially if I like the assignments I'm given. if I don't like the subject, I definitely don't do my work. I don't like to do things I don't want to."</p> <p>Dia: "I think I can do well in any class I'm in, it just depends on the amount of effort I put it in."</p>	Control
<p>Theo: "In my opinion a majority of the time the smarter people take the honors. I feel like when we think of standard, we think of the dumb people who don't do any work and are lazy. For honors we think of the try-hards and the really smart people."</p> <p>Theo: "I had a very good social and educational experience in my honors English classes"</p> <p>Theo: "We don't really take into account that for some people English language arts comes naturally and to others it doesn't."</p>	Recognition

Theo: "I honestly think I belong in standard, but some others believe I should go higher. I don't like it because some friends seem happy for me while others are kind of mean about it and say things like, 'You're only in standard to make the rest of us look bad.' I know it should be my decision, but others seem to influence that decision."

Theo: "I also fear that if I tell people that I'm in honors they will think I'm showing off."

Jean: "Before I looked at advanced class as higher leveled thinking for smart kids. I wouldn't refer to myself as smart"

Angel: "People in honors seem stuck up about their level and how smart they are. I've noticed this since I've been around them and noticed that they brag about their level in said class talking about enrolling in either honors or standard only makes me feel uncomfortable if I'm around honors students due to feeling judged by people in those classes"

Angel: "I feel like I'd be less motivated in an honors class because I'll feel as though I don't belong"

Theo: "I don't feel like there is really any real difference between standard and honors besides the pace."

Theo: "My concerns for a standard level is just what will it do to my GPA. An honors class will be fine for my GPA"

Jean: "Standard classes shapes the person into what education is really like. It makes you get ready for higher learning."

Milton: "I would not say I learned anything special in honors that I didn't learn in this class this year."

Dunkin: "I have, and I feel it was an okay class to keep a good grade in, but I do not feel I have gained any experience in it besides learning new types of literary elements and further developing my literary skills."

Dunkin: "From now on I would rather be in an honors level class because it is faster and helps my grades and GPA."

Theo: "I feel like most standard teachers are more laid back and chill while honors level teachers can be more uptight and less understanding. My personality is chill and laid back, but I still do my work."

Milton: "I believe standard classes are more busy work then on your own pace"

Perceived Academic/Career Benefits

Perceived Learning Environment

External Motivation (Explicit)

<p>Milton: "I enjoy standard level more than I did honors, I just believe honors classes have more motivated students which causes a better work environment than standard. Some student placed in standard classes just are rebellious and air-headed with causes problems"</p> <p>Angel: "I feel better in a standard classroom."</p> <p>Angel: "I feel like I'd be less motivated in an honors class because I'll feel as though I don't belong"</p>	
<p>Theo: "My personality is chill and laid back, but I still do my work. I fear how that will go over with honors level teachers."</p> <p>Jean: "I feel that maybe teachers would enjoy teaching honor classes more because the kids there would actually respect them. That would reflect back on the students since the teacher would be more kind and nourishing to the class."</p> <p>Jean: "Teachers are the most important part of students gaining confidence. It helps to have a supportive teacher saying that you can achieve greater things."</p> <p>Dunkin: "No, because no matter what, a teacher is a teacher it is up to the student or the teacher to connect and interact with each other even if it seems that a higher level teacher would be more strict, I do not think that is the case"</p> <p>Angel: "I feel as though there won't be any difference because some of the teachers are the same for standard and honors"</p> <p>Dia: "I'm not sure, whether I like my teachers and get along with them is up to them. typically, I'm friendly towards all to teachers but depending on their personalities I'm closer with some more than others"</p>	Teacher Influence
<p>Theo: "I feel like family also is a big factor. If my family told me that they thought I wasn't smart enough for honors, then I wouldn't take honors."</p> <p>Theo: "I feel if I tell my mom I'm in standard she will be disappointed in me but if I take an honors class, she'll be happy."</p>	Familial Influences
<p>Theo: "Some of my peers will say I need to be in honors if I'm in standard and others just don't care"</p> <p>Jean: "There is stereotyping in school. People with higher level classes are seen as smart or intelligent. Sometimes they will look down on the people who are not"</p>	Peer Influences

Milton: "I do think the level classes you are in affect how people look at you and think of you nowadays people are judged so fast over anything and if you are in certain classes you are perceived as smart or dumb really no middle"

Dunkin: "Yes, the first thing people would believe is that a student is not as smart as them since they are taking a lower - level class."

Angel: "Yes because some people believe you are dumber if you enroll in a standard class"

Angel: "People in honors seem stuck up about their level and how smart they are. I've noticed this since I've been around them and noticed that they brag about their level in said class talking about enrolling in either honors or standard only makes me feel uncomfortable if I'm around honors students due to feeling judged by people in those classes"

Dia: "the people I know don't judge me on the classes I take because my teachers and peers that know me know I'm really smart just incredibly lazy"

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