Honors-for-All: The Effect of Detracking on Teachers' Beliefs and Pedagogy

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Dissertation submitted to the faculty of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

In

Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

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April 8, 2024

2021 Virtual Ed.D. Cohort B

Keywords: detracking, equity, honors, middle school, tracking

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ABSTRACT

Tracking, having separate advanced, standard, and/or remedial classes intended to homogeneously group students by perceived or actual ability, is a frequent practice used in U.S. schools, particularly at the secondary level. To promote educational equity, close achievement gaps, and counteract the de facto racial separation between advanced and standard-level courses, some districts and individual schools in Virginia are moving to detrack their offerings and stop offering separate advanced and standard-level courses. This qualitative case study explored how a middle school's newly adopted detracking policy with an honors-for-all approach impacted teachers' beliefs and pedagogy. Data were collected from documents and interviews with six school and district personnel and analyzed using inductive coding techniques until a mutually exclusive scheme of categories had been generated. The study concluded with the discussion, implications, recommendations, and conclusion of the results.

The findings identified four categories that answered the research questions: opinions on honors-for-all, defining what "honors" means, instructional shifts in an honors-for-all classrooms, and challenges in practices. Overall, the study found that: (a) teachers' beliefs on tracking and honors-level classes did not change after implementation of detracking and there was a general divide in opinions between the teachers and non-teaching faculty, (b) there were varying definitions of what "honors" means among the district, school, and staff, (c) teachers' instruction shifted to adopt new pedagogical tools and strategies to meet the diverse learning

needs in a mixed-ability honors classroom, and (d) teaching in an honors-for-all classroom was challenging, especially in differentiating for students' needs, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the accelerated standards in honors mathematics courses. Implications of the study included: (a) the necessity of having teacher buy-in when implementing a new programming initiative, (b) the benefits of vertical articulation with feeder elementary schools to prepare students for the rigor of middle school honors courses, (c) the need for common language and clear definitions across the district and school, and (d) the importance of providing professional development and support personnel to assist teachers in adopting new pedagogical practices in an honors-for-all setting.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Tracking, having separate advanced, standard, and/or remedial classes intended to homogeneously group students by perceived or actual ability, is a frequent practice used in U.S. schools, particularly at the middle and high school levels. To promote educational equity, some districts and schools in Virginia are considering detracking by no longer offering separate advanced and standard-level courses. This was a qualitative case study that used document analysis and interviews to explore how a middle school's newly adopted detracking policy with an honors-for-all approach impacted teachers' beliefs and instruction. Overall, the study found that teachers' beliefs about tracking and honors-level classes did not change after detracking, but teachers did adopt new instructional practices to meet the wide range of learning needs in the honors-for-all classrooms. The study also found that there was a lack of common language and definitions of what "honors" means and despite teachers' best efforts, teaching in an honors-for-all classroom was difficult, especially in the mathematics courses and given the timing of the new policy beginning immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings and implications from this study provide education leaders and policymakers with an understanding of teachers' perspectives on honors-for-all as other schools and districts consider detracking.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the memories of my grandmother, Laura Preizler (1/14/1939-3/2/2024), and my father, Mark Langstein (10/28/1949-1/16/2019).

Grandma Laura was a constant source of inspiration throughout my life. A Holocaust survivor, she was a model of strength, resiliency, faith, and love.

My dad was always my biggest fan and encouraged me to pursue my dreams. I miss him every day and I hope that I have made him proud.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are several important people in my life that I would like to thank and acknowledge in pursuit of this degree and completion of this work. First, I would like to acknowledge my family, especially my mom, Julie Preizler, as well as Arianna, Daniel, and Misty. Without their love and support, achieving this goal would not have been possible. I thank them for their flexibility and patience throughout the long hours spent in classes, studying, researching, and writing. Next, I am incredibly appreciative of the advice and guidance from my chair, Dr. Alexander, and for his encouragement throughout this program to complete this study. I am also grateful to the rest of my committee—Dr. Brabrand, Dr. Cash, and Dr. Sullivan—for their invaluable feedback throughout this dissertation journey and their willingness to serve on my committee. I also wish to thank my fellow 2021 Virtual Cohort B members for cheering me on over the last three years. Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues at Annandale High School for their constant support and encouragement since the beginning of this endeavor and helping me find balance between work and school.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

To track or detrack, that is the question. Educational leaders charged with making decisions to best support students disagree at times about whether students should be tracked in specific course paths (Francis & Darity, 2021; Kitsantas et al., 2017; Loveless, 1999; Moller & Stearns, 2012; Oakes, 2005). Tracking refers to the sorting of students based on their academic ability, either measured or perceived, often into different levels of courses—advanced, standard, and/or remedial (Stanley & Venzant Chambers, 2018). The other option is detracking in which all students are placed in the same level of a course, regardless of perceived or measured ability (Atteberry et al., 2019; Domina et al., 2016; Oakes, 2005). This study intended to examine how tracking and detracking affects the achievement of students. Specifically, this study looked at how one middle school's decision to detrack using an honors-for-all approach impacted teachers' beliefs and instructional practices.

Background

Since the desegregation of public schools in the landmark 1954 case of *Brown v. Board of Education,* educators have attempted to close the achievement gap (Muhammad, 2015). Achievement gaps are differences in academic achievement and performance among groups of students, often along racial, ethnic, and income lines. These gaps become evident in "grades, standardized-test scores, course selection, dropout rates, and college completion rates, among other measures" (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2011). To close achievement gaps, including mitigating de facto segregation, districts are focused on equity-minded initiatives to create access and opportunity to participate in advanced classes and high-quality instruction for traditionally underrepresented student groups (Burris & Murphy, 2014; Muhammad, 2015; Oakes, 2005). In Virginia, schools are accredited based on their subgroup Standard of Learning

(SOL) test scores in English and mathematics to ensure Black, Latinx, English Language Learners (ELLs), students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students are achieving on par with White and Asian students. To mitigate bias and counteract the racial discrepancies between advanced and standard-level courses, some districts and individual schools are moving to detrack their offerings and stop offering separate advanced and standard-level courses. In some cases, schools and districts have moved to detrack in a way in which only advanced-level courses are offered (Atteberry et al., 2019; Burris & Murphy, 2014; Meckler, 2023a, 2023b).

Tracking, having separate advanced, standard, and/or remedial classes intended to homogeneously group students by perceived or actual ability, is a frequent practice used in U.S. schools, particularly at the secondary level (Oakes, 2005; Stanley & Venzant Chambers, 2018). Proponents of tracking advocate that grouping students homogeneously allows teachers to more effectively meet the learning needs of students than mixed-ability classes (Loveless, 1999; Mayer et al., 2018). Although seen in high schools through offering standard, honors, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and dual enrollment levels of classes, tracking begins as early as elementary school (Faitar & Faitar, 2012; Karlson, 2015; Legette, 2018; Stanley & Venzant Chambers, 2018). Student track placement sets students on predetermined post-secondary pathways, affecting college decisions, employment, income, housing, healthcare, and status in the criminal justice system (Beard, 2018; Moller & Stearns, 2012; Morgan et al., 2018; Werblow et al., 2013).

This study sought to examine how detracking in an honors-for-all approach affected teachers' beliefs and pedagogy. The study specifically explored how working in an honors-for-all environment impacted what teachers believe about tracking and honors-level classes and how

their instruction changed since working in a recently detracked middle school. This chapter will introduce the problem, purpose of the study, conceptual framework, research questions, and the delimitations and limitations of this study.

Statement of the Problem

Research has found that tracking can create inequitable learning opportunities for Black and Latinx students, who are traditionally underrepresented in advanced classes, which is a problem in education (Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Legette, 2018; Modica, 2015). Student track placement often considers non-academic factors, such as teacher recommendations, which may be marred by teachers' racial biases (Card & Giuliano, 2016; Legette, 2018; Modica, 2015; Witenko et al., 2017). This produces de facto racial segregation within schools and between track levels (Colgrin & Sappington, 2015; Corra et al., 2011; Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Legette, 2018; Lofton, 2019; Mickelson, 2015; Modica, 2015; Stanley & Venzant Chambers, 2018; Witenko et al., 2017). For students who are not enrolled in advanced classes, this can also lead to negative academic self-perceptions (Karlson, 2015; Legette, 2018; Modica, 2015). Studies have also found differences in teacher quality between tracks, particularly that more experienced teachers are assigned advanced classes and novice teachers are frequently given lower-tracked courses (Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Mayer et al., 2018). This has a detrimental effect on post-secondary outcomes and options as access to advanced, college-preparatory coursework "is effective in diminishing disparate and adverse outcomes for students who are traditionally under-represented in postsecondary educational settings" (Morgan et al., 2018, p. 15). Furthermore, students enrolled in lower-tracked courses are more likely to drop out of high school than students participating in advanced classes (Werblow et al., 2013).

As a result of the perceived inequities tracking creates, there has been an ongoing debate among education researchers as to whether schools should continue to track classes (Francis & Darity, 2021; Kitsantas et al., 2017; Loveless, 1999; Moller & Stearns, 2012; Oakes, 2005). Proponents of tracking argue that there are socio-emotional benefits (Kitsantas et al., 2017) and improved learning outcomes when students are grouped homogeneously (Loveless, 1999, 2016). Pro-tracking researchers are also concerned that detracking may negatively affect the achievement and learning of high ability and gifted learners (Loveless, 1999, 2016). However, advocates of detracking argue that the inequities of tracking are morally questionable and prejudicial to Black, Latinx, and low-income students (Oakes, 2005). A potential compromise in the tracking debate is adopting an open enrollment policy in which students are allowed to take advanced classes without meeting prerequisites. However, open enrollment policies have been found to not result in more racially diverse classes (Corra et al., 2011; Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019; Witenko et al., 2017).

Currently, there is a trend in Virginia towards middle schools adopting detracking policies as a solution to the inequities and negative outcomes of tracking. Regardless of tracking practices, the teacher's role in recommending students for courses, building relationships with pupils, and providing high-quality instruction has a critical effect on students' learning (Beard, 2018; Mayer et al., 2018; Stanley & Venzant Chambers, 2018; Witenko et al., 2017). Whether middle schools choose to track or detrack and how these policy decisions impact teachers' beliefs and pedagogy can have lasting repercussions for students' high school and post-secondary pathways. School tracking policies, teachers' beliefs, and the impact these components combined have on instruction in honors and standard-level classes can lead to egalitarian learning opportunities for all students or impede access to selected groups.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how a middle school's newly adopted detracking policy with an honors-for-all approach impacted teachers' beliefs and pedagogy. Specifically, this study intended to discover how teaching in a detracked setting affected what teachers believe about tracking and honors-level classes and how their instruction changed to ensure all students can be academically successful in advanced classes that were heterogeneously mixed in terms of ability. In a school district where honors-for-all was becoming a trend, middle schools currently lie along a continuum of completely detracked to tracking with open enrollment honors. This research sought to provide an understanding of teachers' perspectives in one of the first middle schools in the district to offer honors-for-all as an increasing number of schools consider detracking.

Research Questions

The primary research question of this study was: how has working in a detracked environment impacted teachers' beliefs and pedagogy? To thoroughly explore the primary research question, the conceptual framework and key findings in the literature were used to consider teachers' philosophies and biases, instructional and curricular differentiation, and equity and access for underrepresented minority students. Therefore, the following research questions were examined:

1. What are teachers' beliefs about tracking and how have these beliefs changed, if at all, since implementation of honors-for-all?
2. What are teachers' beliefs about honors courses and how have these beliefs changed, if at all, since implementation of honors-for-all?

3. How did detracking using an honors-for-all approach change teachers' pedagogy, if at all?

Overview of the Methodology

The methodology for this study was qualitative with a case study design. Strengths of this methodology are that case studies are best able to analyze a particular site and provide rich, in-depth description that creates a vicarious experience for the reader (Merriam, 2009). The study collected data from teachers and other faculty who work at Central Middle School in Central School District; identifying codes, such as T1 for Teacher 1, and pseudonyms for the school and district were used to protect confidentiality. Although the official regulation of the Central School District School Board calls for open enrollment into advanced classes, at Central Middle School, the entire school detracked and initiated an honors-for-all program, per the principal, in that honors was the only level offered in the core subjects—mathematics, English, science, and social studies. The honors-for-all policy began during the 2021-2022 school year with all sixth grade core subjects and continued for the next two school years with each subsequent grade level, Grades 7 and 8, respectively, until full implementation during the 2023-2024 school year with the exception of mathematics.

The intent for students in all grade levels to take honors mathematics was for the program to culminate in all eighth graders enrolled in Algebra I Honors. During the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years, sixth graders were enrolled in either Mathematics 6 or Mathematics 6 Honors and during the 2022-2023 school year, all seventh graders were enrolled in honors mathematics courses. However, the initiative was put on pause during 2023-2024 school year based on feedback from teachers and concern regarding COVID-19 learning gaps. Teachers were especially concerned in this subject area as honors mathematics curricula cover the standards of

the next grade level (e.g., Mathematics 6 Honors is the content for Mathematics 7), resulting in students skipping a year of mathematics and potentially missing skills and content needed for success in Algebra I in eighth grade. During the 2023-2024 school year, students were placed into mathematics classes based on test data without teacher recommendations. Based on the district's long-term vision, Central Middle School intends to revisit honors mathematics for all students.

The study primarily collected data through semi-structured interviews with teachers and other school and district faculty, along with document analysis. Only teachers who have taught at Central Middle School prior to adoption of the honors-for-all policy, have taught at least one full year of honors-for-all courses, and taught honors-level classes since before the detracking initiative were invited to participate. In addition, the principal who created the detracked program and other staff members who were instrumental in the program implementation were asked to interview. Interview responses were recorded and transcriptions were analyzed using coding to generate themes. All participants were given identifying codes, such as T1 for Teacher 1, to protect their identities and ensure confidentiality.

Conceptual Framework

This study explored the relationship between where schools lie on the detracking—tracking continuum, teachers' beliefs about tracking honors, and how these factors affect curriculum and pedagogy. The detracking—tracking continuum is based on Sørensen's five dimensions of tracking:

Table 1

Sørensen's Five Dimensions of Tracking (Sørensen, 1970)

Dimension of Tracking	Definition
Degree of curricular differentiation	The number of classes available within each grade and subject area (e.g., honors, standard-level)
Classroom skills homogeneity	The extent to which schools assign students to classes based on observed characteristics
Track exclusiveness	The degree to which access to higher-level classes is restricted
Track stability	The percentage of students who remain in the same track level over time
Track scope	The extent to which track level in one subject can predict track level in another

When schools are completely tracked they have the following characteristics: (a) a high degree of curricular differentiation where only multiple levels of classes—standard, honors, or remedial—are available within each grade and subject, (b) a high level of classroom skills homogeneity as classes are comprised of students with similar characteristics, (c) a high degree of track exclusiveness as students must meet pre-determined criteria to enroll in advanced classes, (d) a high level of track stability as students typically cannot easily change class level, and (e) a high level of track scope as students are labeled as being advanced, average, or remedial (Domina et al., 2019). Completely detracked schools have the opposite characteristics for each dimension except track stability and track scope as all students are enrolled in the same level of classes. Most schools in Central School district fall somewhere between completely tracked and detracked, offering standard and honors level classes (curricular differentiation), a

moderate levels of classroom skills homogeneity, track exclusiveness, track stability, and track scope as teacher recommendations and open enrollment policies are used.

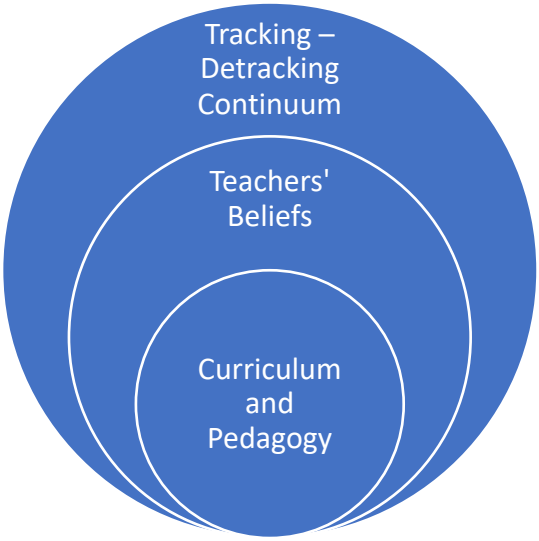
In Central School District, the completely detracked end of the spectrum includes middle schools, such as Central Middle School, who have created honors-for-all course offerings. Honors-for-all programs have very low degrees of curricular differentiation by only offering honors-level classes, no classroom skills homogeneity with students of mixed ability in the same class, and almost no track exclusiveness as access to honors is offered to all students. Central Middle School is one of the only middle schools out of 23 in the county to offer honors-for-all in all grade levels and core content areas except mathematics. A few other middle schools in Central School District have implemented honors-for-all for specific departments or grade-level content areas, but not school-wide. These semi-detracked schools lie toward the middle of the detracking—tracking continuum. On the other end of the spectrum, most middle schools in Central School District continue to practice tracking with an open enrollment policy. The open enrollment tracked schools lie closer to the tracking end of the detracking—tracking continuum, with curricular differentiation that offers 2-3 levels per course, some classroom skills homogeneity, and little track exclusiveness as any student who wishes to take honors courses may do so.

The conceptual framework for this study is centered around the idea that where a school lies on the detracking—tracking continuum can impact teachers' beliefs about tracking and honors which may affect their pedagogy (Bernhardt, 2018; Sørensen, 1970). Because Central Middle School is one of the first schools in Central School District to completely detrack, this study explored how teachers' beliefs about tracking and honors-level classes and their pedagogy were impacted since working in an honors-for-all environment. Specifically, research questions

sought to answer how teachers' beliefs about tracking and honors-level classes had changed and how teachers' instruction had potentially altered, including curricular content and skills taught, since working under Central Middle School's detracked policy. Overall, this study examined how a school's tracking policy affected teachers' beliefs which in turn may have impacted instruction. A visual representation of this framework is displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1

A Framework for Tracking and Teachers' Beliefs and Instruction



Definition of Terms

The following definitions were used for the context of this study:

Advanced Classes – Courses intended to be more challenging and rigorous than standard-level classes, including honors, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and dual enrollment (Atteberry et al., 2019; Corra et al., 2011; Kelly & Carbonaro, 2012).

Detracking – Eliminating the different levels of courses (AP, IB, honors, standard, remedial) such that only one level is offered (e.g., only standard level Mathematics 7 is offered at a school) (Atteberry et al., 2019; Domina et al., 2016; Oakes, 2005).

Honors-for-All – Detracking in such a way that the only level of courses offered is honors (e.g., only Mathematics 7 Honors is offered at a school) (Burris & Garrity, 2008).

Open Enrollment – A course selection policy in which students can select to take advanced classes without meeting any predetermined criteria (Corra et al., 2011).

Standard-level – Courses that are neither advanced nor remedial, usually the default course offering (Corra et al., 2011).

Tracking – Having separate advanced, standard, and/or remedial courses often intended to homogeneously group students by perceived or actual ability (Stanley & Venzant Chambers, 2018).

Delimitations and Limitations

Various limitations and delimitations were considered throughout this study. Limitations are weak aspects of the study design that are outside the researcher's control typically due to methodological issues (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). A main limitation of the study was that of the fourteen teachers and other faculty members invited to participate based on the participant criteria, only six educators—three teachers, one instructional coach, one administrator, and one district office administrator—consented to be interviewed. The limited number of participants may have been due to the study being conducted during the two weeks immediately before Central School District's winter break and the controversial opinions on the honors-for-all initiative among staff that will be further explored in Chapter 4. However, Stake (1995) and Yin (2018) state that case studies are not sample-driven and therefore sample size is irrelevant to this methodology. Another limitation of the study was the newness of the policy. Although findings from the study may be helpful in guiding other schools looking to detrack, the long-term impact may not yet be seen. Other limitations included the potential for bias as the researcher was the

primary instrument of data collection and possible issues with reliability and validity that are common in case studies (Merriam, 2009).

Delimitations are aspects that narrow the study's scope based on decisions made by the researcher (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The primary delimitation related to the generalizability of the study given the purposeful sampling that was used. Only teachers and other faculty affiliated with the same middle school were invited to participate as this site was a unique case. However, Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that qualitative research is not intended to be generalizable in the same way quantitative studies are and Merriam (2009) explains that the reader can apply what is learned from a particular case to the reader's own context. Another delimitation related to data collection. Case study research involves data collection from observations in addition to interviews and document analysis (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). The decision to not conduct observations was based on the primary research question of how teachers' beliefs and pedagogy have changed. Observations were not conducted for this study as teachers' pedagogy prior to the policy change was not seen and therefore comparisons could not be made between researcher-observed current instruction to before honors-for-all was implemented. Stake (1995), however, explains that interviews can be used to observe the unobservable in case study research.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation study is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the background to the topic, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, conceptual framework, research questions, delimitations and limitations. Chapter 2 presents the literature review that synthesizes current and relevant research on tracking organized into five themes: race and bias in track placement, teacher quality and pedagogical differences between tracks, student achievement

between tracks, and socio-emotional effects of tracking. Chapter 3 explains the research design and methodology, data collection procedures, instrument design, and data analysis techniques. Chapter 4 will provide the data, findings, and analyses of the study. Chapter 5 will discuss the major findings, implications, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Tracking, the sorting of students based on their academic ability, either measured or perceived, is commonly used in U.S. schools (Stanley & Venzant Chambers, 2018). The theory of tracking allows teachers to effectively meet the learning needs of their students, such as moving through the curriculum at a faster pace or providing more support to those who need it (Mayer et al., 2018). In addition, tracking students typically begins prior to high school, which sets students on pre-determined high school and post-secondary pathways (Faitar & Faitar, 2012; Karlson, 2015; Legette, 2018; Stanley & Venzant Chambers, 2018). Beginning as early as elementary school, tracking can affect college and career decisions that have long-term impacts on employment, income, housing, healthcare, and status in the criminal justice system (Beard, 2018; Moller & Stearns, 2012).

Research has shown that tracking can lead to inequitable learning opportunities for underrepresented minority students, particularly Black and Latinx students (Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Legette, 2018; Modica, 2015). Placement of students into tracks often includes teacher recommendations, which are impacted by teachers' racial biases (Card & Giuliano, 2016; Legette, 2018; Modica, 2015; Witenko et al., 2017). This results in racial segregation within schools (Colgrin & Sappington, 2015; Corra et al., 2011; Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Legette, 2018; Lofton, 2019; Mickelson, 2015; Modica, 2015; Stanley & Venzant Chambers, 2018; Witenko et al., 2017). Tracking can also create negative self-perceptions of academic ability for students in lower-tracked classes (Karlson, 2015; Legette, 2018; Modica, 2015) and produce discrepancies in teacher quality between tracks (Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Mayer et al., 2018).

This literature review examines current research about the effect tracking has on the learning opportunities for underrepresented minority students, especially Black and Latinx youth.

This literature review begins by explaining the search process used to identify and select sources that depict the current state of tracking in the United States. The chapter then synthesizes the major themes found in reviewing current research and sources. The themes include race and bias in track placement, teacher quality and pedagogical differences between tracks, student achievement between tracks, and socio-emotional effects of tracking. This section then explores the educational policy and leadership debate on whether schools should continue the practice of tracking or move to detrack courses. Finally, this literature review concludes with a summary of findings and themes and identifies gaps in the present body of knowledge on tracking.

Search Process

The search process for this literature review was conducted using the EBSCOhost research database through the Virginia Tech library system. Once an initial body of articles had been found, the reference lists from these studies—and suggested studies from the Mendeley Reference Manager program—assisted me in identifying further current research. The Virginia Tech interlibrary loan program also helped secure studies not available through EBSCOhost. Key search terms used included *tracking, detracking, open enrollment, ability sorting,* and *underrepresented minority students.* Searches were completed from May 2021 to August 2023. All studies were organized in the Mendeley Reference Manager program. Over 70 sources—including research studies, literature reviews, policy briefs, and books—were analyzed, with 44 used to synthesize the current research for this literature review. The 44 sources critically reviewed for this literature review paper were chosen based on themes identified in the research questions, seminal works by researchers who study tracking, and the varied perspectives and findings to reduce bias. In addition, most of the articles selected were research studies with references from the published literature reviews used to identify other key studies. International

studies were excluded from this review due to the limited comparability between U.S. tracking systems and those in other countries.

Race and Bias in Track Placement

Racial Segregation by Track

Current research has shown that there is a racial divide between higher- and lower-tracked classes in the United States (Colgrin & Sappington, 2015; Corra et al., 2011; Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Legette, 2018; Lofton, 2019; Mickelson, 2015; Modica, 2015; Stanley & Venzant Chambers, 2018; Witenko et al., 2017). In particular, Black and Latinx students are found to be underrepresented in higher-tracked classes and overrepresented in lower-tracked classes (Colgrin & Sappington, 2015; Corra et al., 2011; Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Legette, 2018; Lofton, 2019; Mickelson, 2015; Modica, 2015; Stanley & Venzant Chambers, 2018; Witenko et al., 2017). In a quantitative study, Mickelson (2015) examined the track placements of 1,812 Black and White students from 24 middle schools in a North Carolina school district to determine if there was a relationship between first- and second-generation segregation based on elementary and middle school racial makeup and academic track demographics, respectively. Mickelson found that regardless of the racial makeup of a school, the mean percentage of Black students in advanced courses was lower than the mean percentage of the Black student population, and higher in the remedial classes in comparison to the mean percentage of the Black student population. For instance, in racially balanced schools that were approximately 42% Black, about 60% of the students in remedial language arts courses were Black compared to 14% in advanced language arts courses. Furthermore, Mickelson's study compared the students' track placements with corresponding second grade standardized test scores and found that while nearly 70% of White students who scored in the 80%-89% range on the second grade test were placed in the advanced

language arts in eighth grade, less than 20% of the Black students who scored in the 90%-99% range on the second grade test were placed in the advanced track.

In addition to identifying de facto segregation within schools, studies have also found that track enrollment criteria can contribute to the racial divide (Card & Giuliano, 2016; Faitar & Faitar, 2012; Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Lofton, 2019; Modica, 2015). Although standardized test scores and grade point averages are usually factors in determining students' course placements, teachers' and school counselors' recommendations are often considered as well (Bernhardt, 2018; Card & Giuliano, 2016; Faitar & Faitar, 2012; Francis et al., 2019; Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Lofton, 2019; Modica, 2015). Placement decisions made by teachers can be influenced by non-academic variables, such as race and socio-economic status (Bernhardt, 2014; Card & Giuliano, 2016; Lofton, 2019; Modica, 2015). In qualitative interview studies conducted by Legette (2018) and Stanley and Venzant Chambers (2018), Black students at the secondary level expressed that there were Black students who were capable of taking more rigorous courses but were held back by their teachers.

Bernhardt (2014) interviewed high school social studies teachers in a case study to understand how teachers made course recommendations during academic advising. Themes from the interviews included that teachers considered non-meritocratic characteristics of the students, such as behavior, work ethic, motivation, and their own individual experiences with tracking from their time as students in making placement decisions. Teachers in the study were also found to be doubtful that their placement decisions really mattered, if other stakeholders—administrators, parents, counselors—made the final decision. The participants also expressed that course recommendations were made with complete autonomy as there were no formal criteria developed for advanced classes (Bernhardt, 2014, 2018). Additionally, Card & Guiliano (2016)

found that eliminating teacher recommendations and including scores from assessments such as the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test for gifted identification, may reduce bias in placement decisions and identify more underrepresented high-ability minority students.

Studies have also found that counselor bias in course recommendations exists. Francis et al. (2019) conducted a quantitative audit study that surveyed 152 school counselors to determine track placement bias. Counselors were told to analyze batches of transcripts and teacher narratives with varying academic and behavior ratings and decide whether to recommend each student for Advanced Placement (AP) Calculus. Each profile was either a nameless control or used a name that implied race—White or Black—and gender. Using a regression analysis with a linear probability model, the researchers found that the Black female profile was 20% less likely to be recommended for AP Calculus than the nameless control, $R^2 = 0.249, p < 0.01$. In addition, the Black female profile with the highest rankings in academics and behavior was equally as likely as the nameless control with the lowest academic and behavior ratings to be recommended for the college-level mathematics course (Francis et al., 2019).

Open Enrollment and Race

Open enrollment is a scheduling practice in schools that allows all students who want to take advanced courses to do so without meeting predetermined criteria. Studies have found that having an open enrollment policy does not result in more racially diverse classes (Corra et al., 2011; Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019; Witenko et al., 2017). Witenko et al. (2017) conducted a quantitative study with a survey methodology using a chi-square analysis; the study surveyed 1,324 high school White and Latinx students to explore who was encouraging students to enroll in advanced classes. The researchers found that although the high school operated under an open enrollment system for honors and AP classes, Latinx students were still underrepresented in

honors mathematics ($X^2 = 121.10, p = 0.001$), AP mathematics ($X^2 = 75.14, p = 0.001$), honors English ($X^2 = 132.58, p = 0.001$), and AP English ($X^2 = 74.00, p = 0.001$). In addition, the Latinx students in the study indicated they were more likely to find encouragement to take advanced courses from sources other than their regular classroom teachers, such as a college and career counselor, Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program teacher, or other school-related adults (Witenko et al., 2017).

Rodriguez and McGuire (2019) examined the enrollment patterns of Black and White students and the magnitude of racial differences in AP classes. Among the 2,812 sample high schools, 71% of the schools had a difference of 5% in the proportion of Black and White students enrolled in AP classes, 28% of the schools had a difference or 15% or greater in the proportion of White students enrolled in AP classes as compared to Black students, and 74% had an open enrollment policy allowing students to self-select into AP classes. Rodriguez and McGuire found that although both Black and White students were equally likely to attend a high school with AP courses, 30% of the Black students in the sample attended a high school with smaller percentages of students enrolled in AP classes and with fewer AP course options in comparison to 21% of their White counterparts (2019). Enrollment patterns within the schools showed a larger proportion of White students registered in AP classes than Black students. The high schools that had greater racial diversity and more AP course offerings had larger Black-White gaps due to achievement gaps between racial groups on state reading ($r = 0.119, p < 0.001$) and mathematics exams ($r = 0.084, p < 0.001$). Open enrollment policies were also not found to assist in closing the gap (Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019).

Similarly, a quantitative study conducted by Corra et al. (2011) examined a North Carolina school district that had an open enrollment policy to determine if race and gender

impact course selections. Using Scholastic Aptitude Test scores, the researchers predicted the number of Black and White high school students who would enroll in advanced courses out of a sample of 5,470 students. These estimates were compared to the actual number of students enrolled in higher-tracked classes (Corra et al., 2011). The results of the study showed that despite the open enrollment system more White students and fewer Black students enrolled in advanced courses than predicted. Using a chi-square statistic, this difference was statistically significant, $p < .000$ in all content areas. The researchers, however, acknowledge that a limitation of the study was that a root cause analysis was not conducted to determine why such a significant difference existed (Corra et al., 2011).

Some studies have also found that in schools with open enrollment policies, racial inequities prevail (Kettler & Hurst, 2017; Ricciardi & Winsler, 2021). A quantitative longitudinal study by Kettler and Hurst examined the enrollment patterns in AP and International Baccalaureate (IB) classes for Black and Latinx students across 117 suburban high schools between 2001 and 2011. Despite a decrease in the percentage of White students and increases in overall participation in AP and IB classes, teaching experience, and enrollment of Black and Latinx students, the researchers found that the racial gaps in enrollment did not change over the decade. In addition, using a multiple regression analysis the researchers found different factors contributed to the Black-White gap in comparison to the Latinx-White gap. A school's advanced academic achievement index ($r = 0.240, R^2 = 0.19, F(116) = 3.72, p = 0.01$) was found to be a predictor of the Black-White gap, with greater advanced academic achievement indices correlated to a larger Black-White gap. The advanced academic achievement index was defined as the proportion of students taking college entrance exams, the proportion of students scoring at or higher than the state's standard for college readiness on the college entrance exams, and the

proportion of graduating students who met or exceeded the state's standard for college readiness on mathematics and language arts achievement tests. This index, however, was not a strong predictor of the Latinx-White gap. The number of minority faculty in a school was a stronger predictor of the Latinx-White gap ($R^2 = 0.20, F(116) = 3.80, p = 0.01$), with less minority faculty correlating to a larger Latinx-White gap, yet this factor was not a strong predictor of the Black-White gap. The persistent racial gaps were indicators that although "AP and IB programs may be open to all students regardless of formal gifted and talented identification, subtle expectations of who ought to participate may exist in the perceptions of both students and educators" (Kettler & Hurst, 2017, p. 14).

Examining factors that affect advanced course enrollment beginning in elementary school continuing through high school, Ricciardi and Winsler (2021) found that race was strongly correlated with participation in advanced classes. Using a multivariate logistic analysis, the researchers analyzed data from approximately 33,000 students within the same school district across 15 years from pre-kindergarten through senior year of high school. The researchers discovered that even after controlling for skills at school-entry and competence at the end of elementary school, of the 8,258 students who enrolled in at least one AP course, Black students were 40% less likely than their White counterparts of comparative ability to enroll in AP classes, $X^2(23, N = 8{,}258) = 2{,}696.0, p < 0.001$. After controlling for poverty and English Language Learner (ELL) status, race was a factor in advanced course participation overall. Race was also found to be related to elementary school track level, which affected advance course enrollment at the secondary level (Ricciardi & Winsler, 2021).

Teacher Quality and Pedagogical Differences Between Tracks

In addition to demographic discrepancies, tracking can also result in inequities in the quality of learning and instruction between different tracks (Judson, 2017; Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Mayer et al., 2018). Lower-tracked classes are frequently assigned to teachers who are either novice or have less experience (Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013). Having an inexperienced teacher can be detrimental to lower-tracked, lower-income, and underserved students as novice teachers are less adept at improving student learning outcomes and achievement. A mixed-methods study conducted by Mayer et al. (2018) used 26 high school teachers across three districts to investigate the differences in teachers' pedagogy and classroom environments between lower- and higher-tracked classes. The findings showed that teachers who taught both levels of tracked courses were less likely to have a positive classroom climate, effective behavior management and student engagement, and instruct with high-quality pedagogical techniques in their lower-tracked classes in comparison to their higher-tracked sections. The researchers observed that teachers did not develop positive relationships with their students or create lesson activities that were student-centered and included critical thinking skills in their lower-tracked sections (Mayer et al., 2018).

In a quantitative study conducted by Kelly and Carbonaro (2012), the researchers used data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS) to compare teachers' expectations for student educational attainment based on student track placement. The data from NELS selected for the study compared the teacher reports of 5,852 students placed in different tracks by subject to determine if there is a discrepancy between the expectations of the higher- and lower-tracked teachers. Kelly and Carbonaro found that track placement affected teachers' educational expectations for their students. Using a chi-square statistic, the study found that for

the same student, the teacher of the higher-tracked course was more likely to expect the student to attend college than the teacher of the lower-tracked course, $X^2(4) = 37.0425$, $Pr = 0.000$. Additionally, Werblow et al. (2013) conducted a quantitative study on dropout rates per academic track that analyzed data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 using hierarchical generalized linear modeling. Using a sample of 16,081 high school sophomores enrolled in 752 schools, the researchers found that students in lower-tracked courses were 60% more likely to dropout than those in higher tracks. Overall, the dropout rate among students in the lower track—comprised of primarily Black, Latinx, and lower-income students—was 76% compared to 24% in the higher track, $p < 0.001$ (Werblow et al., 2013). The findings from both these studies point to possible impacts of tracking on students' educational outcomes that could be the result of teachers' expectations and instructional quality between academic levels (Kelly & Carbonaro, 2012; Werblow et al., 2013).

Moreover, a quantitative study by Judson (2017) analyzed survey results using Wilcoxon signed-ranked tests to compare how pedagogy and attitudes varied among standard, honors, and AP classes. The participating 183 teachers instructed mathematics and science in Arizona and taught at least two tracks. Teachers in both disciplines emphasized preparing students for future study in the field and understanding concepts in their AP classes more than their standard and honors classes. More time was spent on analyzing data, student-centered learning, small group work, whole class discussion, and constructed responses in their AP sections. Science teachers in particular believed their standard classes required explicit explanation and classroom structures and routines (Judson, 2017). The results of this study demonstrated that teachers were more likely to use critical thinking and inquiry-based activities in their advanced courses in contrast to

lectures and teacher-centered strategies in lower-tracked classes, affecting the type of instruction students in different tracks received (Judson, 2017).

Other studies, however, have found that higher quality instruction does not always take place in advanced classes (Kitsantas et al., 2017). Kitsantas et al. conducted focus group interviews with 49 elementary and middle school students to understand students' perceptions of the gifted program the participants were enrolled in. While students found the teachers of the gifted program were more supportive than the instructors of the general education classes and students enjoyed the accelerated pace and added rigor of the advanced courses, not all feedback was positive. Students felt that teachers did not always provide conceptual depth with topics and that some teachers read slideshow presentations verbatim when delivering lessons. In addition, students complained that the gifted program assigned more homework than the general education classes and at the middle school, the various subject-specific teachers did not coordinate with each other when tests and projects were due, adding to students' workloads and limiting their opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities (Kitsantas et al., 2017).

Student Achievement Between Tracks

Tracking and Higher-Achievers

Research on student achievement on standardized tests among tracks has mixed results. Some studies have found that enrollment in advanced courses can have a positive impact for high-ability and gifted learners' test scores (Card & Giuliano, 2016; Colgrin & Sappington, 2015). Colgrin and Sappington conducted a quantitative study using data from the Illinois State Board of Education to determine if AP participation impacted ACT exam results when comparing students by race and socio-economic status. Using an analysis of variance (ANOVA) statistic and post hoc tests, Colgrin and Sappington found enrolling in an AP course, regardless

of race and income level, had a treatment effect between 10% and 25% in English, social studies, and science, and a large treatment effect of 34.8% in mathematics. Although the study found positive effects on ACT exam results for all students who participated in AP courses, the benefits were greatest for White students in comparison to Black and Latinx students. The researchers suggest that the added achievement advantage for White students is rooted in the design and traditional schooling structure of AP classes that does not equally benefit all races or cultures. Colgrin and Sappington argue that the curriculum and instruction of AP classes is geared toward White, middle class culture and values, suggesting that transformational change is needed to meet the needs of students from other backgrounds. In addition, Black students were underrepresented in AP courses comprising only 6.2% of the enrollment in AP classes while Black students made up 17.1% of the total student population in Illinois (Colgrin & Sappington, 2015).

Furthermore, Card and Guiliano (2016) conducted a quantitative study that examined the effect having separate higher-tracked classes for gifted and high-ability elementary students had on the achievement of minority students in an urban district using data from 140 schools. Using a regression discontinuity analysis, Card and Guiliano found that minority students, who were predominantly Black and Latinx, had significant gains of approximately (SD = 0.5) in reading and mathematics standardized test scores from fourth through sixth grade. In addition, the study found that the higher-tracked course primarily benefitted the minority students who were barely eligible for the placement, whereas higher-ranked minorities and White students had insignificant growth. The study also found that having the separate class did not negatively impact the regular-tracked students' achievement.

Tracking and Lower-Achievers

Despite some studies finding positive results on the effects of tracking on standardized test scores for higher-tracked students, other studies have found that tracking widens the achievement gap between higher- and lower-achieving students (Domina et al., 2019; Mickelson, 2015). Mickelson's study found, along with the racial segregation between advanced and lower-tracked courses, that the more time students spent in a racially imbalanced middle school, the lower their end-of-course eighth grade reading and mathematics scores were. The higher the percentage of Black students in a school, who were predominantly enrolled in regular-tracked and remedial courses, the lower the test scores. White students, the majority of whom were enrolled in advanced courses, outperformed their Black peers. The study suggests that tracking and racial segregation between schools can have detrimental effects on students' achievement, especially Black students (Mickelson, 2015).

In a study that examined the effects of tracking on inequality, Domina et al. (2019) measured Sørensen's five dimensions of tracking in relation to student achievement. The five dimensions of tracking include degree of curricular differentiation, defined as the number of classes available within each grade and subject area; classroom skills homogeneity, defined as the extent to which schools assign students to classes based on observed characteristics; track exclusiveness defined as the degree to which access to higher-level classes is restricted; track stability, defined as the percentage of students who remain in the same track level over time; and track scope, defined as the extent to which track level in one subject can predict track level in another (Sørensen, 1970). Analyzing longitudinal test data from approximately 20,000 students from eighth to 10th grade as well as interviews from teachers and administrators, Domina et al. discovered that when students were grouped by ability for English based on prior achievement,

higher-achieving students' test scores increased quicker than their lower-achieving peers, $r = 0.06, p < 0.001$. In addition, when sorted by ability in mathematics, lower-achieving students had consistent low levels of achievement growth, $\beta = 0.02, p < 0.001$ (2019). Overall, the researchers found that schools with rigid tracked systems have larger achievement gaps between high- and low-achievers in both English and mathematics (Domina et al., 2019).

Detracking and Student Achievement

To raise the achievement of lower-tracked students, some schools have opted to detrack their courses to create mixed-ability advanced classes, eliminating the different levels of classes (AP, IB, honors, standard, remedial) such that only one level is offered (Atteberry et al., 2019; Conway, 2021). In one suburban school district, detracking efforts began in the middle school to prepare students to take IB courses for English and mathematics in the later years of high school (Atteberry et al., 2019). International Baccalaureate English would become the only option for students to take in 11th and 12th grades and the IB mathematics courses would become open enrollment junior year. Enrollment in the IB classes increased from 20%-30% in 1994 to 70%-80% in 2011, including greater enrollment of students with lower prior achievement, based on Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT) scores. After detracking, the high school's average IB scores did not change. The test scores of the highest-achieving students were not negatively affected by detracking practices. Moreover, on the IB mathematics tests, students in the highest tier of the PSAT exam performed slightly better after detracking than before (Atteberry et al., 2019).

In another high school, Conway (2021) analyzed student achievement for 19 students previously in standard level mathematics who were given the opportunity to take honors geometry and Algebra II classes during their freshman and sophomore years. According to

Conway's analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), students' standardized test scores improved at a statistically significant level, $F(1) = 22.731$, $p < .0001$ (Conway, 2021). Moreover, detracking the mathematics classes did not have a negative impact on the test scores of the students who were already tracked for honors, while the students who chose to stay in non-honors classes had a slower rate of growth (Conway, 2021). These findings point to possible benefits of detracking courses and opening access to advanced classes to all students.

Detracking, however, has not always been found to increase student test scores (Loveless, 2009, 2016; Mazzeo, 2010). In a study by Loveless (2016), the researcher used regression analysis to compare AP scores by state. Each state was ranked in terms of its percentage of eighth grade students in tracked classes in 2009. According to the research, a positive relationship was found between tracking and AP exam scores for all demographic subgroups ($r = 0.52, p < 0.01$), including Black ($r = 0.41, p < 0.01$), Latinx ($r = 0.31, p < 0.05$), and White students ($r = 0.41, p < 0.01$). A 10 percentage point increase of eighth grade students in tracked classes was connected to a two percentage point increase in the number of students scoring three or better on AP exams. Additionally, studies of detracking initiatives in Massachusetts middle schools (Loveless, 2009) and Chicago high schools (Mazzeo, 2010) found that detracking efforts did not lead to better test scores for all students. In Chicago, English and Algebra I scores did not change after detracking (Mazzeo, 2010) and in Massachusetts, English scores were unaffected, but detracked schools had more students fail the state mathematics exams than tracked sites (Loveless, 2009). Overall, Loveless (2009 and Mazzeo (2010) found that tracking can have a positive impact on student achievement on standardized testing while detracking may result in lower test scores or no change.

Socio-Emotional Effects of Tracking

Tracking can also have an impact on students' academic self-perceptions and educational expectations (Conway, 2021; Karlson, 2015; Legette, 2018; Modica, 2015; Stanley & Venzant Chambers, 2018). The research has shown the existence of negative socio-emotional effects for lower-tracked students, which can be particularly detrimental to minority youth (Legette, 2018; Modica, 2015; Stanley & Venzant Chambers, 2018). In schools where tracking has resulted in de facto racial segregation, Black students who are placed in regular-tracked or remedial courses associate lower academic ability with being Black and internalize these negative stereotypes about their race (Legette, 2018; Modica, 2015). In qualitative studies conducted by Legette (2018) and Modica (2015), the few Black students who qualified for the advanced track felt marginalized in their classes and admitted to consciously choosing to dissociate themselves with their counterparts in non-advanced courses by trying to behave against the stereotype threat.

Studies have also found that students in higher tracks generally have higher expectations of attending college than those in lower tracks (Karlson, 2015). In a quantitative study, Karlson (2015) used a differences-in-differences analysis to determine the effect of high school track placement on educational expectations in years. The study analyzed 13,230 responses NELS 1988 database in regard to students' expected levels of educational attainment during participants' eighth and 10^{th} grade years. The study found that when controlling for the variables of family background; grade point average (GPA); parental educational expectations; teacher influence, based on teacher reports of students' behavior, work ethic, and attendance; and peer effects, including self-esteem and peer perceptions, students enrolled in advanced mathematics classes had expectations of attaining 0.377 ($p < .001$) more years of education than those enrolled in standard-level mathematics and those enrolled in advanced English classes had

expectations of attaining 0.355 additional years of education ($p < .001$) than their standard-level counterparts (Karlson, 2015). Additionally, the study found that track movement had an impact on students' educational expectations. Students who moved from higher- to lower-tracked English courses lost 0.399 ($p < .001$) years of expected educational attainment while students who switched from lower- to higher-tracked mathematics gained 0.526 ($p < .001$) years of expected educational attainment when controlling for all variables (Karlson, 2015).

Other studies, however, have found that students enrolled in gifted programs and advanced classes can also experience negative self-perceptions (Cash & Lin, 2022; Kitsantas et al., 2017). In a survey of 292 elementary students, Cash and Lin (2022) compared the psychological well-being of participants who were enrolled in either full-day gifted programming, pull-out advanced mathematics classes, or did not receive gifted services. Using hierarchical linear modeling, the researchers found significant levels of maladaptive perfectionism ($\beta = .43, p < .01$), defined as the difference between students' unrealistic expectations and their ability to achieve said expectations, loneliness ($\beta = -.25, p < .05$), and lower self-perceived abilities in mathematics ($B = -.44, p < .001$) between students in the full-day gifted program and those in the pull-out advanced mathematics class. Additionally, students who did not receive any gifted services reported lower levels of maladaptive perfectionism ($\beta = -.44, p < .01$) and loneliness ($\beta = .30, P < .01$) than students in the full-day gifted program. The researchers suggest that these findings could be explained by the big-fish-in-a-little-pond effect, in which students may have compared themselves to the class average, which was higher in the full-day gifted program than for students in the pull-out advanced mathematics course and those who did not receive gifted services (Cash & Lin, 2022).

The Tracking Debate

The question as to whether secondary schools should continue to track classes has been an ongoing debate by education researchers (Francis & Darity, 2021; Kitsantas et al., 2017; Loveless, 1999; Moller & Stearns, 2012; Oakes, 2005). On one side, proponents of tracking argue that there are socio-emotional benefits (Kitsantas et al., 2017) and improved learning outcomes for students (Loveless, 2009, 2016). On the other side, education researchers argue that tracking creates inequities that are morally unethical and advocate for detracked systems (Oakes, 2005).

In Favor of Tracking

The Tracking Wars, an oft-cited book by Loveless (1999), the researcher examines the factors that impact tracking policy, namely whether schools decide to detrack. Findings are derived from a survey and interview data from administrators and teachers from California and Massachusetts, states that attempted state-wide detracking reforms in the 1990s. Although the intent of the study was to explore the institutional, organizational, political, and technical forces that influence tracking policy, Loveless makes several arguments in favor of tracking. Throughout the text, Loveless cited research and his study that heterogeneous classes lead to learning loss for average and high-achievers, minority students are not unfairly placed in lower-tracked courses, and instruction in mixed-ability classes is difficult for teachers (Loveless, 1999). Overall, Loveless advocated that the research on the effects of tracking is inconclusive and too ambiguous to eliminate the practice altogether (1999).

In Favor of Detracking

In a frequently cited work conducted by Oakes (2005), the researcher found that the inequities of tracking cited in much the current literature in this review were present in secondary

schools in the 1970s, even with current tracking practices consisting of more open enrollment policies (Corra et al., 2011; Meckler, 2023a, 2023b; Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019; Witenko et al., 2017). In examining 13 junior high and 12 senior high schools across the United States, Oakes found that while higher-tracked classes were more likely to promote critical thinking skills and teach content necessary for college-readiness, lower-tracked classes were more likely to include class activities based on rote memorization with time spent on completing worksheets and behavior management. In terms of the classroom environment, students in higher-tracked classes were more likely to have positive relationships with their peers and teacher, who was more likely to be experienced, and have ambitious post-secondary aspirations. Students in lower-tracked classes, however, were less likely to have trusting relationships with the teacher, who was usually a novice, and more likely to have unfriendly peers, lower self-esteem and less ambitious post-secondary goals (Oakes, 2005). The researcher also found that higher-tracked classes were predominantly made up of White and Asian upper-middle class students whereas the lower-tracked classes were majority Black and Latinx lower-income students. Oakes attributed the racial and socio-economic divide between tracks to bias in track placement, finding that Black and Latinx students were less likely to be recommended for advanced classes than White and Asian students with similar prior achievement levels. Based on findings that heterogeneous, mixed-ability classes were instructed more similar to higher-tracked courses than to remedial classes and many of the courses that were intended to be homogenous were actually fairly diverse in terms of student ability levels, Oakes argued that detracking is beneficial for underrepresented minority youth and does not produce negative effects for students who are considered high ability.

Additionally, in a quasi-experimental quantitative estimation study using a linear probability model, Francis and Darrity (2021) explored whether racial divisions in advanced classes perpetuate future racial segregation. In racially diverse schools, the researchers found that a one percentage point increase in the proportion of Black juniors and seniors enrolled in AP mathematics classes increased the probability that a Black first-year student will take an AP mathematics course by the end of high school from 40% to 62%. In predominantly Black high schools, this increase is 11%. Overall, the researchers concluded that growing Black enrollment in advanced classes increases Black enrollment in AP courses in subsequent grade levels. The researchers argue that eliminating tracking is not sufficient to end racial segregation within schools and advocate instead "to dismantle the advanced course system and provide enriched education for *all* students…." (Francis & Darity, 2021, p, 198).

Attempts to Detrack

Efforts to detrack schools have met with varied results (Burris & Garrity, 2008; Domina et al., 2016; Dougherty et al., 2015; Meckler, 2023a, 2023b). Dougherty et al. (2015), used a regression discontinuity design using linear regression models to study the effects of placing middle school students in an accelerated mathematics sequence, including taking Algebra I in eighth grade. Students were selected to participate in the accelerated program based on the Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS) to predict the probability of passing the North Carolina end-of-course Algebra I exam. While the study discovered that Black and Latinx participation in accelerated mathematics coursework increased by 26%—versus the 10% increase for White and Asian students—the study also found that only 54% of the Black and Latinx students who were accelerated in seventh grade take Algebra I in eighth grade and only 34% take geometry in ninth grade. Acceleration, however, does increase the odds that students

enroll in and pass the geometry end-of-course exam by 30% for all subgroups (Dougherty et al., 2015).

In a quantitative study conducted by Domina et al. (2016) using model equations, the researchers explore how middle schools responded to California's initiative for all eighth graders to take Algebra I. Across the state, enrollment in eighth grade Algebra I increased from 35% to 65% between 2003 and 2013. Middle schools with larger proportions of lower-income, Black, and Latinx students were more likely to detrack and provide Algebra I to all eighth graders. Schools with more affluent populations, academically mixed, and high achieving, however, were more likely to "track up" in offering geometry in eighth grade in addition to Algebra I. Between 2003 and 2013, the number of middle schools offering geometry increased from 5% to roughly 50% and the percentage of eighth graders enrolled in geometry increased from 2% to 7%. The researchers argue that "tracking up" impeded egalitarian efforts to provide rigorous instruction to all students and suggest that this effect is more likely to occur in relatively diverse and elite locales (Domina et al., 2016).

Atteberry et al. (2019) conducted a quantitative study that examined the participation and achievement effects in a school district that had detracked its middle and high schools and opened enrollment for IB courses. The school district under study was the focal point of *Detracking for Excellence and Equity* by Burris and Garrity (2008) in describing how and why the school system made the decision to detrack. After the detracking process began, enrollment in IB classes in 11th and 12th grades increased from 20-30% of students taking the classes to 70-80%, including students who had lower prior achievement based on PSAT scores and would normally not have enrolled in the class. Furthermore, students were more likely to choose the more challenging IB Mathematics Standards Level course than the IB Mathematics Studies

course after detracking, especially among students with high scores on the PSAT (Atteberry et al., 2019). The study also found that average IB scores did not change significantly with the increased number of lower prior achievement students in the courses. Detracking did not negatively affect the scores of the students in the highest achievement group, based on PSAT scores. For the mathematics IB exams, students in the top tier of PSAT scores did slightly better after detracking than before (Atteberry et al., 2019).

Finally, Shaker Heights City School District detracked most of its fifth through ninth grade offerings starting in the 2020-2021 school year (Meckler, 2023a, 2023b). While response to the new programming was mixed, teachers reported using more differentiation and small group strategies to meet the needs of students at various levels of content mastery. Furthermore, the percentage of Black eighth grade students meeting proficiency standards on the Algebra I end-of-course test increased from 43.8% in 2021 to 51% in 2023. The percentage of all eighth grade students meeting proficiency on the Algebra I end-of-course test also increased from 68.1% in 2021 to 71.3% in 2023. Black enrollment in AP classes also rose from 53 students in the 2019 school year to 98 students in the 2023 school year (Meckler, 2023b).

Summary

Research findings suggest tracking can generate inequitable learning opportunities for students, especially minorities (Faitar & Faitar, 2012; Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Legette, 2018; Stanley & Venzant Chambers, 2018). Students in lower-tracked classes are more likely to be Black and Latinx (Colgrin & Sappington, 2015; Corra et al., 2011; Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Legette, 2018; Lofton, 2019; Mickelson, 2015; Modica, 2015; Stanley & Venzant Chambers, 2018; Witenko et al., 2017) due to teacher bias in placement recommendations (Card & Giuliano, 2016; Faitar & Faitar, 2012; Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Lofton, 2019; Modica, 2015).

Students in lower-tracked classes are also more likely to have a novice teacher (Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013) who is less likely to develop positive relationships with students, create a welcoming classroom climate, or plan lessons using higher-level critical thinking skills (Mayer et al., 2018). Although some studies show the benefits of tracking on the standardized test scores of advanced-tracked students (Card & Giuliano, 2016; Colgrin & Sappington, 2015), other studies find that tracking may widen the achievement gap between higher- and lower-achieving students (Domina et al., 2019; Mickelson, 2015). Tracking may also result in students having a negative self-evaluation on their ability to be successful academically which can lead to lower career and educational goals for the future (Karlson, 2015; Legette, 2018; Stanley & Venzant Chambers, 2018).

Based on this synthesis of the current research, there are gaps in the present body of knowledge on tracking that can be furthered explored. Although detracking courses is trending throughout Virginia and Central School District, few studies have investigated the effects of detracking on teacher quality, pedagogy, curricula, and the impact detracking has on students. In particular, little research has been conducted on detracking using an honors-for-all approach. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology used to examine how one middle school detracked to provide access to advanced courses to all its students.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study examined if detracking can allay the problems associated with tracking, including the inequities for underrepresented student groups that it may create (Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Legette, 2018; Mayer et al., 2018; Modica, 2015). Using a case study, qualitative methodology, this study explored whether teaching at a school that has detracked using an honors-for-all approach impacted teachers' beliefs about tracking and honors-level classes and their pedagogy. By analyzing instruction in an honors-for-all setting, this study sought to answer if detracking can mitigate achievement gap inequities in education through opening access to advanced classes to all students.

This chapter will begin with a restatement of the purpose of the study and the research questions. The chapter will then present the case study methodology that will be used and the rationale for using this approach. Explanations of the research procedures will follow, including the selection of site and sample, data collection, management, and analysis processes, and instrument design. Finally, the steps taken to ensure quality and ethical research practices will be discussed, including reflections on bias, the role of the researcher, and methods to ensure trustworthiness of the data.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how a middle school's newly adopted detracking policy with an honors-for-all approach impacted teachers' beliefs and pedagogy. Specifically, this study intended to discover how teaching in a detracked setting affected what teachers believe about tracking and honors-level classes and how their instruction changed to ensure all students can be academically successful in advanced classes that were heterogeneously mixed in terms of ability. In a school district where honors-for-all was becoming a trend, middle

schools currently lie along a continuum of completely detracked to tracking with open enrollment honors. This research will seek to provide an understanding of teachers' perspectives in one of the first middle schools to offer honors-for-all as an increasing number of schools consider detracking.

Research Questions

1. What are teachers' beliefs about tracking and how have these beliefs changed, if at all, since implementation of honors-for-all?
2. What are teachers' beliefs about honors courses and how have these beliefs changed, if at all, since implementation of honors-for-all?
3. How did detracking using an honors-for-all approach change teachers' pedagogy, if at all?

Research Design and Methodology

This study used a qualitative case study methodology. A case study allows the researcher to holistically explore a specific case using rich, in-depth description that creates a vicarious experience for the reader (Merriam, 2009). This design allows educators to understand a particular bounded system through providing insights and overall conclusions and interpretations as to the significance of the case (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the case is Central Middle School, which was unique due to its newly adopted honors-for-all programming.

Research Design/Justification

A case study is a useful approach when analyzing a particular school site to learn from the perspectives and experience of those involved (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This methodology is appropriate for this study to provide an in-depth examination of a unique setting that generates meaning and understanding of the case (Merriam, 2009). According to Merriam (2009), "case

study has proven particularly useful for studying educational innovations, evaluating programs, and informing policy" (p. 51). Central Middle School was one of the only schools in the district to initially detrack all its core content areas—English, science, social studies, and mathematics—in all grade levels. In addition to the recent policy change, Central Middle School chose to detrack using an honors-for-all approach in that all courses were only offered at the advanced level. However, in the third year of implementation of the new programming initiative, Central Middle School opted to pause detracking mathematics due to the accelerated standards in honors mathematics courses. A few of Central School District's other middle schools had partially detracked specific grade-level content teams and departments and there appeared to be an increasing consideration to provide honors-for-all, either partially or completely, across the county. Although case studies are criticized for having limited generalizability, by providing a holistic view of the case, readers will learn and expand their understanding of the educational program and determine which aspects can be applied to their context (Merriam, 2009). As other middle schools look at revamping their tracking policies and course offerings, providing insight through in-depth description of the experiences of teachers at Central Middle School may guide these decisions.

Site and Sample Selection

Research Site

This case study took place at Central Middle School in Central School District located in Virginia. At the time this study was conducted, Central Middle School served students in Grades 6 through 8 and was considered a diverse middle school in the county. During the 2022-2023 school year, Central Middle School employed 82 teachers serving 883 pupils who demographically comprised of 16.2% Asian, 18.6% Black, 43.8% Latinx, and 17.3% White

students. Additionally, Central Middle School's student body was 58.2% English Language Learners, 20.5% students with disabilities, and 66.2% students considered economically disadvantaged. On top of its honors-for-all policy, Central Middle School participated in the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program (IBMYP).

Beginning with the 2021-2022 school year, Central Middle School gradually implemented its honors-for-all policy. According to the school website, Central Middle School decided to implement honors-for-all for four reasons: (a) equity and having honors classes mirror the school's student demographics, (b) increasing access to rigor for all students, (c) flexibility in support including providing team-taught honors classes for English Language Learners and students with disabilities, and (d) safe academic risk-tasking to enroll in honors-level classes before high school. Executed as a 3-year rollout, each subsequent year added the next grade level's courses as all-honors, beginning in the 2021-2022 school with sixth grade core classes and ending the initial phases in 2023-2024 with eighth grade classes transitioning to the new program, except mathematics. Exceptions to enrolling in honors courses were given to students with disabilities, particularly students with intellectual disabilities and autism who require access to a modified curriculum, and newcomer English Language Learners at a level 1 or 2 English Language Proficiency based on the WIDA ACCESS for ELLs exam, who were placed in self-contained sections to meet their unique learning needs.

Sample

Purposeful sampling was used as only faculty from Central Middle School were asked to participate. Teachers were invited to participate if they met the following criteria: (a) taught honors-level courses at Central Middle School prior to the detracking initiative, (b) have taught at least one full years of honors-for-all, and (c) still taught at Central Middle School. These

criteria ensured that only teachers who could answer the study's research questions were selected to participate. Teachers were the primary participants of the study as they were on the front lines in implementing the new detracked policy in the classroom. Other non-teaching faculty were also invited to interview, including the former principal who implemented the honors-for-all programming, the current principal who was formerly the director of student services when the detracked policy was implemented, the gifted resource teacher, instructional coaches, and the technology specialist for additional insight into the new program and the shifts they had seen in beliefs and instruction. Based on consultations with the former principal of Central Middle School, seven teachers, two administrators, two instructional coaches, one technology specialist, and one gifted resource teacher were identified as potential participants to be recruited. The former principal implemented the honors-for-all programming during the 2021-2022 school year and was later promoted to district office leadership during the summer of 2023. After inviting identified potential participants, six people agreed to be interviewed: three teachers and three non-teaching faculty members (an instructional coach, the current principal, and the former principal/district office administrator). Limited willingness to participate may have been due to the timeframe in which the study was conducted, immediately before Central School District's winter break, and the controversial opinions on the honors-for-all initiative among staff that will be further explored in Chapter 4.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected primarily through interviews with teachers and other faculty supplemented with document analysis to provide methodological triangulation and a holistic view and experiential understanding of the case (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018).

Table 2

Data Sources for the Study

Interviews	Documents
Teachers (3)	Curriculum Guides
Principal (1)	SOL Scores
District Office Administrator (1)	Virginia of Department of Education (VDOE)
	Site Report Card
	Master Schedule
	Faculty Presentations
	School Website
	Course Descriptions
	Academic Advising Information
	Training/Professional Development Materials
	Honors-for-All Implementation Information
	Communications on Honors-for-All

Prior to data collection, this researcher completed the CITI Training on Social and Behavioral Research course during Fall 2021. This researcher received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Virginia Tech and research approval from Central School District to be permitted to collect data during Fall 2023. Once permissions were confirmed, a consent to participate was sent to faculty members at Central Middle School who met the study criteria. The consent to participate explained the purpose of the study, that participation was voluntary, that participants' identities were kept confidential, and that the study anticipated minimal risk to participants.

Interviews and Instrument Design

Interviews are an essential source of data in qualitative research and case studies (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Interviews were the primary data source for this study

because they were the best way to explore the research question: how have teachers' beliefs and pedagogy changed since working in a detracked school? Interviews were semi-structured with questions aligned to the study's research questions and conceptual framework. The interview protocol was conducted on Zoom and semi-structured with questions developed by the researcher. Questions were piloted by 4-5 educators who have experience working in another Central School District middle school that was partially detracked using an honors-for-all approach to ensure validity in that items ask what was intended. During the pilot, feedback was gathered on clarity and length of questions and any needed adjustments were made. Feedback primarily consisted of tweaks to the wording of questions and suggestions for other questions to ask, which were considered and added if aligned to the research questions. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. After the interview, participants were given an opportunity to review their responses on the transcriptions to ensure their perspectives were accurately captured (Stake, 1995).

Although interviews were semi-structured to allow for thick description and personal insights and perspectives from teachers and other faculty, a core set of questions were asked that aligned to the study's research questions (see Appendix C and Appendix D). The interview questions included:

Table 3

Alignment of Research Questions and Interview Questions

Research Questions	Teacher Interview Questions	Other Faculty Interview Questions
Opening	What is your teaching experience?	What has been your involvement in implementing the honors-for-all programming?
Research Question #1: What are teachers' beliefs about tracking and how have these beliefs changed, if at all, since implementation of honors-for-all?	Do you think students should be tracked, meaning honors and standard-level classes should be separate? Why or why not?	Do you believe detracking (honors-for-all) has impacted students' academic achievement? Why or why not?
	Have your beliefs about tracking changed since working in an honors-for-all school? If so, how?	Do you believe detracking (honors-for-all) has impacted students' socio-emotional well-being? Why or why not?
	Do you believe detracking (honors-for-all) has impacted students' academic achievement? Why or why not?	Do you think detracking (honors-for-all) mitigates inequities for students in traditionally underrepresented groups? Why or why not?
	Do you believe detracking (honors-for-all) has impacted students' socio-emotional well-being? Why or why not?	
	Do you think detracking (honors-for-all) mitigates inequities for students in traditionally underrepresented groups? Why or why not?	
Research Question #2: What are teachers'	How are honors courses different from standard-level courses?	What were the teachers' responses to honors-for-all when it was first announced?

beliefs about honors courses, and how have these beliefs changed, if at all, since implementation of honors-for-all?	Have your beliefs about honors classes changed since working in an honors-for-all school? If so, how? Do you think honors-for-all is appropriate for all students? Why or why not?	Do you think teachers' opinions about honors-for-all have changed since implementation? If so, how?
Research Question #3: How did detracking using an honors-for-all approach change teachers' pedagogy, if at all?	Have your planning, instruction, and assessment practices changed since working in an honors-for-all school? If so, how? What professional development, if any, did you receive to teach honors-for-all? Are you receiving any professional development now to teach honors-for-all?	How have the planning, instruction, and assessment practices at Central Middle School changed since honors-for-all began? What professional development did teachers receive to teach honors-for-all? Are teachers currently receiving any professional development to teach honors-for-all? Do you know of any plans to provide any professional development to teach honors-for-all in the future?
Closing	Have there been any surprises about honors-for-all? If so, what were they?	Have there been any surprises about honors-for-all? If so, what were they?

Document Analysis

Document analysis was used to supplement and corroborate information gained from interviews with participants. Documents were selected and analyzed to gain additional insight into the honors-for-all programming and implementation, including how Central Middle School's official stance on tracking and honors-level courses changed with the decision to detrack and the impact on teachers' pedagogy. Some of these documents were publicly available, while others were not. Publicly available data include SOL score data and school report card information from the VDOE School Quality Profiles website and information about honors-for-all and course descriptions from the course catalog on the Central Middle School and Central School District websites. For data that were not publicly available, requests to receive these documents were part of the Central School District external research office application to gain county permission to conduct the study. Once approved by the school district, interview participants were asked to provide these documents, which include: curriculum guides for core content areas, school master schedules, academic advising information such as decision rules regarding mathematics course placement, training/professional development materials on honors-for-all, any documents created and used by school administration and leadership in planning and implementing honors-for-all, and any communications and presentations shared with school faculty and families about honors-for-all. Documents collected did not contain identifiers; any identifying information on documents was asked to be deleted or redacted prior to sharing with the researcher.

Data Treatment

According to Yin (2018), it is critical to have a system of organizing and maintaining data to easily save and retrieve information. A data management system was employed primarily

using computer folders containing Microsoft Word documents using a common naming protocol for feasibility in identifying data sources. A Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was also created that listed each data file with a brief description of its contents to facilitate data retrieval. Any field notes written during interviews were kept in a notebook with dates, times, descriptions, and reflections from the researcher. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for the school name and school district. Participating school personnel and documents were given identifying codes, such as "T1" for teacher, and "D1" for documents. Interviews were recorded and transcribed on a password-protected computer that met Virginia Tech's minimum security standards. Digital files of documents used for analysis and typed field notes were also saved on a password-protected device. Hard copies of documents and notes were locked in a fire-safe box kept in the researcher's home office. All interview transcriptions, recordings, notes, and documents will be deleted or shredded two years after the conclusion of the study. All consent forms will be deleted and shredded after three years of completion of the study, per Central School District's regulations.

Informed Consent was completed prior to interviews being scheduled and any questions being asked. Interviews were conducted and recorded using Zoom. The record function within Zoom generate closed captions and transcriptions. However, the researcher used Microsoft Word to ensure transcriptions were accurate. Notes taken by the researcher during interviews were documented in a notebook locked in a fire-safe box. These notes defined and tracked keywords, ideas, specific phrases and expressions used during the interview. The transcriptions and recorded videos were used for data analysis and were saved on a password-protected computer that met Virginia Tech's minimum security standards. The non-public data in the form of

documents that was used for analysis were primarily hard copies and were saved in a fire-safe box in the researcher's home office.

Data Analysis Techniques

Following data analysis procedures common to most qualitative studies, the data were mined and coded to generate themes and categories that answer the research questions (Merriam, 2009). An inductive process, analysis began with open coding to initially analyze the interview transcripts and documents and detect specific, meaningful information. Codes were then sorted into subcategories and then more expansive, theoretical categories until an exhaustive and mutually exclusive scheme of categories had been generated (Merriam, 2009). Methodological triangulation, demonstrating that findings were evidenced in multiple sources, including the interview and document analysis data, supported construct validity (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018).

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is essential to evaluate a study as valid and reliable. The ability to trust a study's findings is based on whether the study was conducted in a rigorous and ethical manner taking into account the potential for bias as the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection (Merriam, 2009). Member checking and methodological triangulation were used to maintain trustworthiness of conclusions and interpretations. Member checking allows participants to review data for accuracy (Merriam, 2009). After interviews were conducted, transcriptions were sent to participants to review for accuracy and make edits. Methodological triangulation involves comparing and cross-checking data obtained from multiple sources to support study findings and conclusions (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). Data were collected and triangulated from multiple interview participants that included teachers and other faculty members who implemented the honors-for-all programming and documents that

provided insight into how the new detracking policy was initiated and impacted teachers' instructional practices.

Timeline

Prior to data collection, approval was obtained by Virginia Tech's Institutional Review Board (IRB) through the Human Research Protection Project on September 23, 2023. Virginia Tech also required completion of the CITI Training on Social and Behavioral Research, which was completed by the researcher in September 2021. In addition to IRB approval, Central School District required researchers to apply to conduct external research in its district. The Central School District external research office had set application deadlines every other month with approval decisions made approximately six weeks after the application due date. Once approved, the school district provided written confirmation of the approval. The Central School District external research application was submitted October 2, 2023 with approval given on December 1, 2023. Based on Central School District's external research regulations, the researcher had between December 1, 2023 and December 15, 2023 to complete data collection.

Recruitment of participants took place in early December 2023 after receiving approval from Central School District. An introductory email (Appendix A) with the Informed Consent form (Appendix B) was sent to all the identified teachers and faculty at Central Middle School, based on consultation with the former principal. The Informed Consent form included key information about the study, including the purpose and research questions, and information about what consenting entails and how to withdraw from the study, if desired. The email was sent with a request for read receipt to ensure each potential participant received the information. The recruitment email with the Informed Consent form attached was sent every few days throughout the data collection window. The educators willing to participate in the interview sent the

researcher their signed Informed Consent form. Upon receipt of participants' signed Informed Consent forms, the researcher responded to the participant with the researcher's signature added to the Informed Consent form and a request to schedule an interview between December 1, 2023 and December 15, 2023. All interviews were completed prior to Central School District's winter break when most staff are off contract.

Methodology Summary

This study used a case study, qualitative research methodology to examine the unique case of Central Middle School that had recently adopted a new honors-for-all, completely detracked policy. This case study sought to investigate how one middle school's transition to honors-for-all programming impacted teachers' beliefs about tracking and advanced courses and their instruction. Data were collected primarily through interviews with select teachers and other school and district personnel with document analysis to verify trustworthiness and triangulate findings.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how a middle school's newly adopted detracking policy with an honors-for-all approach impacted teachers' beliefs and pedagogy. Specifically, this study intended to discover how teaching in a detracked setting affected what teachers believe about tracking and honors-level classes and how their instruction changed to ensure all students can be academically successful in advanced classes that were heterogeneously mixed in terms of ability. In a school district where honors-for-all was becoming a trend, middle schools currently lie along a continuum of completely detracked to tracking with open enrollment honors. This research sought to provide an understanding of teachers' perspectives in one of the first middle schools to offer honors-for-all as an increasing number of schools consider detracking.

The primary research question of this study was: how has working in a detracked environment impacted teachers' beliefs and pedagogy? To thoroughly explore the primary research question, the conceptual framework and key findings in the literature were used to consider teachers' philosophies and biases, instructional and curricular differentiation, and equity and access for underrepresented minority students. Therefore, the following research questions were examined:

1. What are teachers' beliefs about tracking and how have these beliefs changed, if at all, since implementation of honors-for-all?
2. What are teachers' beliefs about honors courses and how have these beliefs changed, if at all, since implementation of honors-for-all?
3. How did detracking using an honors-for-all approach change teachers' pedagogy, if at all?

This chapter states the findings and analysis of data collected from interviews and documents. Data analysis was conducted based on the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 1 that theorizes that where a school lies on the detracking—tracking continuum can impact teachers' beliefs about tracking and honors which may affect their pedagogy (Bernhardt, 2018; Sørensen, 1970). Analysis was also conducted with the themes from the literature review in Chapter 2 in mind: (a) race and bias in track placement, (b) teacher quality and pedagogical differences between tracks, (c) student achievement between tracks, and (d) socio-emotional effects of tracking. Both the conceptual framework and literature review themes provided a way to organize and interpret the data in this case study.

As explained in Chapter 3, data analysis procedures, common to most qualitative studies, were followed. Data were examined and coded to generate themes and categories that answer the research questions (Merriam, 2009). Analysis was conducted inductively, beginning with open coding to initially analyze the interview transcripts and documents. Codes were then sorted into subcategories and then more expansive, theoretical categories until an exhaustive and mutually exclusive set of major categories were generated (Merriam, 2009). Through the data analysis process, four major categories emerged that aligned with the research questions:

- Opinions on Honors-for-All
- Defining what "Honors" Means
- Instructional Shifts in Honors-for-All Classrooms
- Challenges in Practice

Data analysis and organization also revealed themes within each major category. The four categories and the breakdown of themes for each are outlined in Table 4.

Table 4

Categories and Related Themes as Aligned to the Research Questions

Categories and Related Themes	Research Questions
(a) Opinions on Honors-for-All o Before Honors-for-All Implementation o After Honors-for-All Implementation o Teachers' Beliefs on Tracking and Honors	Research Question #1: What are teachers' beliefs about tracking and how have these beliefs changed, if at all, since implementation of honors-for-all? Research Question #2: What are teachers' beliefs about honors courses and how have these beliefs changed, if at all, since implementation of honors-for-all?
(b) Defining what "Honors" Means o District's Definition of "Honors" o Curricular Differences o Determining Honors Criteria o Teachers' Definitions of "Honors"	Research Question #2: What are teachers' beliefs about honors courses and how have these beliefs changed, if at all, since implementation of honors-for-all?
(c) Instructional Shifts in Honors-for-All Classrooms o Pedagogical Strategies and Tools o Support for Teachers	Research Question #3: How did detracking using an honors-for-all approach change teachers' pedagogy, if at all?
(d) Challenges in Practice o Differentiating for Students' Needs o Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic o Mathematics	Research Question #3: How did detracking using an honors-for-all approach change teachers' pedagogy, if at all?

Overall, this case study found a lack of change in teachers' beliefs on tracking and honors-level courses since implementation of the honors-for-all programming at Central Middle School. The realities and challenges of teaching in an honors-for-all classroom confirmed teachers' initial beliefs about whether separate standard and honors-level classes should be offered and what "honors" means. Honors-for-all became a controversial issue among faculty at Central Middle School, with a general divide between teachers and non-teaching staff (i.e., the

principal, instructional coach, and district office administrator). However, despite the disagreement of whether honors-for-all is beneficial for students, there were major pedagogical changes that teachers adopted in an attempt to meet a diverse range of student needs.

Prior to presenting the findings in detail, the following is a review of Central Middle School. Located in Central School District in Virginia, Central Middle School serves students in Grades 6 through 8 and is considered a diverse middle school in the county. During the 2022-2023 school year, Central Middle School employed 82 teachers serving 883 pupils who demographically comprised of 16.2% Asian, 18.6% Black, 43.8% Latinx, and 17.3% White students. Additionally, Central Middle School's student body is 58.2% English Language Learners, 20.5% students with disabilities, and 66.2% students considered economically disadvantaged. On top of its honors-for-all policy, Central Middle School participates in the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program (IBMYP).

Beginning with the 2021-2022 school year, Central Middle School gradually implemented its honors-for-all policy. The first year, all sixth grade core content became only honors. In the 2022-2023 school year, all seventh grade core content became only honors too. Executed as a 3-year rollout, each subsequent year added the next grade level's courses as all-honors ending the initial phases in 2023-2024 with eighth grade classes transitioning to the new program, excluding mathematics. Mathematics did not continue to detrack due to the curricula of honors mathematics courses that accelerated students to the next grade level's content. Exceptions to enrolling in honors courses are given to students with disabilities, particularly students with intellectual disabilities and autism accessing a modified curriculum, and newcomer English Language Learners at a level 1 or 2 English Language Proficiency based on the WIDA

ACCESS for ELLs exam, who are placed in self-contained sections to meet their unique learning needs.

Chapter 4 is organized based on the four categories and relevant themes that are listed in Table 4. References and quotations from participant responses to interview questions and information collected from documents and artifacts will be cited to provide evidence of findings and in-depth description, typical of a case study (Merriam, 2009). Overall, data were obtained through interviews with six participants—three classroom teachers, the principal, an instructional coach, and the former principal who is now a district office administrator—and 26 documents and artifacts that captured the implementation, planning, processing, and pedagogical changes of Central Middle School's honors-for-all programming. Data sources were given identifying codes and notations, as listed in Table 5.

Table 5

Identifying Notation References

Notation	Meaning
T1, 12-7	Teacher 1 was interviewed on December 7
T2, 12-12	Teacher 2 was interviewed on December 12
T3, 12-15	Teacher 3 was interviewed on December 15
IC, 12-7	Instructional Coach was interviewed on December 7
P, 12-10	Principal was interviewed on December 10
DOA, 12-15	District Office Administrator was interviewed on December 15
D#	Document #
A#	Artifact #

This method of using identifying codes was used to ensure confidentiality of participants, documents, and artifacts. The first two categories address the first two research questions on whether teachers' beliefs about tracking and honors-level courses changed after implementation

of honors-for-all programming at Central Middle School. The third and fourth categories address the third research question on how teachers' pedagogy changed in an all-honors classroom.

Opinions on Honors-for-All

Teachers' opinions on the school's plan to detrack were mixed from the beginning of Central School District's honors-for-all journey. After completing the first two and a half years of the new programming, teachers' beliefs about tracking and honors-level courses, overall, did not change after implementation of the honors-for-all programming at Central Middle School. The realities and challenges of teaching in an honors-for-all school generally confirmed teachers' initial reactions to honors-for-all. Honors-for-all, after implementation, became a controversial issue at Central Middle School, with a general divide in opinions between the teachers and non-teaching faculty.

Before Honors-for-All Implementation

According to the Principal and District Office Administrator, who was the principal of Central School District when honors-for- all was implemented, the idea of honors-for-all began with a discussion of current enrollment data, presented in Table 6 below, with the school's instructional leadership team, consisting of teacher leaders, coaches, and administrators, during the 2020-2021 school year (DOA, 12-15; P, 12-10). Despite Central School District's open enrollment policy, the enrollment data before honors-for-all was implemented revealed that disproportionality existed in student enrollment in honors-level and intervention courses—classes designed to provide additional support to the general education curriculum—compared to the school's student demographics, particularly among Latinx students, students with disabilities across all disability categories, and English Language Learners at all levels of English Language Proficiency. School instructional leadership members brainstormed collectively on ways to

remove barriers and open access to underrepresented groups, culminating in the idea of honors-for-all. The idea of moving to honors-for-all and the data reviewed were presented to the whole staff, and later families (DOA, 12-15; P, 12-10)

Table 6

School Year 2021-2022 Honors and Intervention Enrollment Data at Central School District Before Implementation of Honors-for-All Programming[1]

Student Demographic Group	Percentage of School Population	Percentage Enrolled in Honors Courses	Percentage Enrolled in Intervention Courses
Latinx	41%	31%	64%
Students with Disabilities	19%	4%	52%
English Language Learners	25%	6%	45%

Before honors-for-all programming was implemented at Central Middle School, the school administration facilitated discussions and solicited input from the school faculty during the spring of the 2021-2022 school year. Based on staff survey responses presented at a faculty meeting on April 19, 2021, 61.3% of the staff expressed an initial positive reaction to the honors-for-all programming plan, while 32% felt unsure, and 6.7% had an initial negative reaction to the initiative (D7). From the Principal's perspective, many teachers started processing the idea of honors-for-all by questioning why the school was tracking and labeling students as "honors" or "not honors" when all students are capable (P, 12-10). According to the District Office Administrator, reactions to honors-for-all among staff ranged from enthusiasm to believing it was "a terrible idea" (DOA, 12-15). Teacher 3, a social studies teacher, was in support of honors-for-all from inception when the idea was proposed during the spring of 2021. According to

[1] Information retrieved from Central Middle School's faculty presentation on April 19, 2021.

Teacher 3, social studies classes prior to honors-for-all had generally been heterogeneously mixed in terms of ability because students participating in the AVID program often chose history as the one honors class they need to take to meet AVID requirements. Teacher 3 always felt that opening access to honors for more students was an area of need (T3, 12-15).

Among the staff who were not initially in favor with honors-for-all when it was proposed during the 2021-2022 school year, very few were strongly against it and most were willing to try the new detracking initiative or at least open to discussing their concerns and opinions with school administration (P, 12-10). Teacher 1, a social studies teacher, stated he had a feeling that honors-for-all "probably isn't the best idea," but felt "somewhat… noncommittal" and "was willing to give it a try" (T1, 12-7). According to the Principal and District Office Administrator, most teachers recognized that there was an equity issue and wanted to find ways to open access and remove barriers to students, but were unsure how to meet so many different learning needs within the same class (DOA, 12-15; P, 12-10). Central Middle School's leadership led school-wide discussions and solicited feedback from teachers and faculty during the spring of 2021 before honors-for-all was implemented. The themes from the staff's initial opinions on honors-for-all were presented at the faculty meeting on April 19, 2021 and contained concerns and questions from teachers about how honors-for-all would look in practice, including (D7):

- Is it still "Honors" if everyone is in it?
- How will teachers be supported with differentiation?
- What will the role of the ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) and Special Education teachers be?
- How will we engage families through this process?
- How will we know if we have been successful? If not, what next?

- How will we ensure all students are supported and [have] a positive experience?

These concerns, according to the District Office Administrator, did "come to fruition" as will be discussed further in the section on challenges in practice (DOA, 12-15).

After Honors-for-All Implementation

After implementation of honors-for-all, the initiative became a controversial, "hot subject" at Central Middle School (T2, 12-12). Both Teacher 2 and Teacher 3 expressed surprise at how many teachers were frustrated and disliked the honors-for-all programming (T2, 12-12; T3, 12-15). The Principal alluded to the high rate of teacher turnover since the COVID-19 pandemic affecting "the level of engagement of being on board with honors-for-all… because it wasn't the original group [of teachers]" (P, 12-10). However, the District Office Administrator believed that opinions among teachers did not change after implementation of honors-for-all (DOA, 12-15). Among the three teachers interviewed in this study, their opinions about honors-for-all between before and after implementation remained constant. While Teacher 3 was in support of honors-for-all, Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 were in favor of returning to an open enrollment system with separate honors and standard-level classes (T1, 12-7; T2, 12-12; T3, 12-15).

Academic Impact. Teachers' opinions on the academic impact of honors-for-all were mixed. Two of the teachers interviewed felt that honors-for-all did not meet the academic needs of all students (T1, 12-7). Teacher 1 explained that honors-for-all "doesn't scratch the itch appropriately for everybody." Teacher 1 elaborated that while there are some students who need extra support to complete the assignment, other students finish early and are given "extra work to keep them busy." Teacher 1 also stated he was surprised and felt "a punch in the gut" that a student had told their counselor they wanted to be challenged more in their classes. Overall,

Teacher 1 felt that honors-for-all negatively impacted students' academic achievement because "you're not reaching a lot of the kids that you could reach, the higher level kids" and "those kids who are at the… the lower end of the grade scale or the interest level or the effort level, whatever you wanna say… they're always gonna be kids that struggle" and that it was difficult for teachers to meet both groups' needs. Teacher 1 sensed that "the [students] impacted are the ones who want to be pushed more" and that in the honors-for-all setting, "a lot of them come away with their expectations not being met, their excitement not being… fulfilled, not in the way they wanted to" (T1, 12-7).

While Teacher 1 stressed the negative impact he observed for high-achieving students, Teacher 2 also believed that honors-for-all negatively impacted students, emphasizing students who were placed in an honors setting and were struggling. Teacher 2 expressed particular concern for students who were placed in an honors mathematics classes during the 2022-2023 school year and not only did not find success but then had to retake the course again even though the students did not have a choice in whether to enroll in an honors class, stating it was not the students' fault they failed. Teacher 2 also referenced a colleague of a different content area who had lamented that the curriculum is "watered down" to meet the needs of students who were having difficulty with the pace of the honors class (T2, 12-12).

Contrary to Teacher 1 and Teacher 2, Teacher 3 thought although gifted learners are possibly not stimulated enough in the current detracked classroom, honors classes offered before the honors-for-all programming were not challenging for exceptional and gifted learners either. Teacher 3 expressed pride in her students' academic successes and stated she was impressed with what her students have accomplished and thought her students were also impressed with themselves. "I have students who have walked in here and don't know what a sentence looks

like, and by the time the year is over they are writing three paragraphs" (T3, 12-15). Overall, Teacher 3 believed that honors-for-all has made her a "better teacher" and that current honors classes are more rigorous by providing students an opportunity to write, read, think, and conduct research independently. However, Teacher 3 also recognized that honors-for-all is challenging, especially in her team-taught ESOL classes and had observed last year that students began to give up when they were struggling (T3, 12-15).

From the perspective of the Principal, Instructional Coach, and District Office Administrator, there is potential for academic benefits in an honors-for-all setting. The Principal stated that even though teacher turnover was high due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Central Middle School was able to attract teachers coming from diverse schools who were excited by the access honors-for-all provided students (P, 12-10). The District Office Administrator also stated that it was "beautiful" that distinctions in tasks and instruction between the different levels of classes was eliminated and teachers were collaborating to provide the best instruction for all students. However, she also recognized that honors-for-all was difficult for some students, especially those on the cusp of qualifying for self-contained special education classes and students who read below grade level (DOA, 12-15).

The Instructional Coach believed that academic success in an honors-for-all setting boiled down to having strong instruction and knowing who is in the classroom. The Instructional Coach felt that if teachers are instructing in a way that meets every student where they are while still exposing students to the honors curriculum, it will benefit students academically overall and prevent misbehavior that can occur when students struggle or feel unchallenged. The Instructional Coach stated that the teacher's commitment to "digging deeper into content," "providing text that's above their reading level," while also "providing scaffolds and supports"

is the key to "make [students] shine in an academic setting." He also observed that some teachers are really in support of honors-for-all to open access for students, but that every teacher has had a different experience because "students are not a constant" and it is a "roll of the dice… what the skills that they bring into the classroom are" (IC, 12-7).

Socio-Emotional Impact. Teachers' opinions on the socio-emotional impact of honors-for-all were also mixed. Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 both stated that many students were not aware that they were in honors classes because they were not given the choice, so students did not necessarily see themselves differently as "honors" students or change students' academic self-perceptions of themselves (T1, 12-7; T3, 12-15). According to Teacher 1,

> …I know one of the arguments they made for honors-for-all was you would take kids who wouldn't typically think of themselves as "honor students." You'd put them in a class that is called an "honors class" and they may change their perception of themselves or through osmosis if they're surrounded by student who are honors-level performers in that subject, they may then raise their game, and I found it's kind of the opposite. (T1, 12-7)

Teacher 2 stated that "that there were some students that were placed in the honors-for-all that maybe didn't think they belonged in the honors-for-all and have found success," but socio-emotionally it "negatively impacted more students than it helped" (T2, 12-121).

Non-teaching faculty felt more positively about the socio-emotional impact honors-for-all had on students than their teacher counterparts (DOA, 12-15; IC, 12-7; P, 12-10). The Instructional Coach believed that socially, students being in classes talking with peers they would not normally interact with in a tracked system allows them "have a different perspective on things" and is beneficial for students especially being in a school as diverse as Central Middle

School (IC, 12-7). The Principal also referenced anecdotal data and comments she had heard from students, such as "I never realized I could be in an Algebra I Honors class" and "Somebody once told me I couldn't be in honors." The Principal shared that a parent had reached out surprised that their student wanted to take IB classes in high school and wondered if the willingness to take on more challenging classes after middle school could be attributed to honors-for-all at Central Middle School (P, 12-10).

The District Office Administrator also expressed her belief that she thinks "that it has impacted [students'] own belief and their mindset and what they're able to achieve…. For some kids that's gonna psych them out, for some kids that's gonna… help them feel more confident." However, the District Office Administrator also reflected that there were students who rose to the challenge, but also those who felt intimidated by honors-for-all which caused some of the misbehaviors in classes (P, 12-15). Also stating that socio-emotional impacts on students were mixed, Teacher 3 opined that it "probably depends on every teacher" and noted that while she does not believe honors-for-all negatively impacted students' socio-emotional well-being, it would also be beneficial if teachers "talk[ed] about how it is an honors class and the fact that… these students are doing well in an honors class" to build up students' confidence (T3, 12-15).

Equity. Teachers' opinions on the equity impact of honors-for-all were mixed as well. Teacher 1 and Teacher 2, both felt that the honors-for-all initiative was detrimental to equity (T1, 12-7; T2, 12-12). T1 opined that equity was a main reason Central Middle School's leadership advocated for honors-for-all. However, Teacher 1 expressed that

> …it's always about… differences between [racial/ethnic] groups and just one group's doing this, one group's that. But I never heard any explanation or no reasoning for like differences within [racial/ethnic] groups. You know, a lot of it is like racial groups they

> talk about. And you know, one kid of one race may do really poorly, and another kid of the same race may do really well? Well… why is that one kid doing well? Why is that one kid doing poorly? It's an individual thing, and I think it's a mistake to think of it as a group thing. You need to treat kids individually…. So I would say it hasn't done anything to improve grades or expectations between groups or anything. If the kids who do well before this are still doing well, the kids who struggled before honors-for-all are still in the same boat, you know, because I think it's an individual student thing. (T1, 12-7)

Teacher 2 also felt that honors-for-all "hurts" equity efforts, arguing that to only offer an honors-level option without students being able to choose for themselves which course is the right fit for them is saying "one-size-fits-all" which "goes against [equity]" (T2, 12-12).

In a more moderate position, the Instructional Coach was of the opinion that although honors-for-all can mitigate inequities for students in underrepresented groups, detracking is not a "catch-all" and that it will not "solve all the problems" based on how diverse Central School District and Central Middle School are and the various backgrounds and experiences the students bring to the classroom. However, the Instructional Coach believed that if the teacher is providing instruction that is meeting every student's needs, honors-for-all can mitigate inequities (IC, 12-7). Teacher 3 echoed the opinion of the Instructional Coach, believing that honors-for-all "could be one of the solutions that's helping," but "that if you're not implementing honors-for-all… is it really doing anything besides just putting all students together?" (T3, 12-15). However, Teacher 3 also recognized the lasting impact course placement decisions can have on students' long-term pathways and stated

> I think all students deserve to have a rigorous course load. They deserve to be challenged in classes. And I think often, if it is left up to them to choose, or even to have teachers to

> choose, there are many students who are capable of taking honors classes that are being left out. (T3, 12-15)

The Principal shared her support for honors-for-all and the positive impacts she has observed on the school's equity focus. The Principal has seen teachers advocating for students, especially English Language Learners, in providing support and access to honors classes. As the school's former Director of Student Services when honors-for-all began, the school has been able to create a master schedule that provides team-taught honors classes to English Language Learners and students with disabilities, including twice exceptional students—students who have been identified as both gifted and eligible for special education services—which Central Middle School was unable to schedule before (D1; P, 12-10).

From the District Office Administrator's perspective, she continued to reflect on the implementation of the honors-for-all programming even after leaving Central Middle School. Still a firm believer that honors-for-all mitigates inequities for students in underrepresented groups, she shared

> We send so many unintended messages to kids about who's worth and who's not to access that level of education…. But it's an issue about who we say is, you know, college bound and career bound, and what kind of path we set them on, and it's so early that set them on these tracks. (DOA, 12-15)

For the District Office Administrator, the question remains on how to continue dismantling tracking policies and get students to self-select honors to create a more equitable system.

Teachers' Beliefs on Tracking and Honors

Overall, the three teachers interviewed in this study held the same beliefs about tracking and honors-level classes before and after implementation of Central Middle School's honors-for-

all programming (T1, 12-7; T2, 12-12; T3, 12-15). Teacher 1, although willing to try honors-for-all, was initially doubtful that the new initiative was a good idea. As a basketball coach, Teacher 1 used an analogy of having separate freshman, junior varsity, and varsity teams based on students' skill level:

> …I coach basketball and you have separated teams… Anybody can try out for any team… essentially based on your skill, and then you get placed where the fit is best, and I don't think there's anything wrong with that…. If we were to randomly throw in some freshman-level players into our practices, int our games. You're not gonna help them. (T1, 12-7)

After having experienced honors-for-all, Teacher 1 felt that "the hopes that they pitched for the honors-for-all I don't see taking place as in… it's not uplifting the performance of students that would otherwise not be in an honors class" (T1, 12-7). Although acknowledging that the experience Teacher 1 had teaching in an honors-for-all classroom "proved him right," he did think that his opinion was shaped by the practice of teaching in a detracked setting (T1, 12-7).

Teacher 1 supported tracking after implementation of honors-for-all because "…kids should be able to push themselves into classes that are going to ideally be more challenging in subjects that they want to be challenged in" (T1, 12-7). Additionally, in a class that is more homogeneous in terms of skill and ability, "you can get to everybody the same way. And the activities are the same. The instruction is the same, the expectations are the same. Nobody's being left behind or ignored…." Teacher 1 expressed his belief that honors-for-all is not appropriate for all students and that having a separate honors class should be an option, although was in favor of open enrollment and that students should not need to "means test to get into it" (T1, 12-7).

Teacher 2 had a similar opinion as Teacher 1, stating "I've always kind of been in line with placing people where there's the best fit instead of trying to force something on some students" (T2, 12-12). Since implementation of the honors-for-all programming, Teacher 2 stated "it doesn't feel like honors-for-all" and that the label stigmatizes students who did not want or were not ready for an honors course. Teacher 2 observed that students who demonstrated mastery in the all-honors classes, which were heterogeneously mixed in terms of students' abilities and skill levels, became peer tutors, which from Teacher's 2 perspective, did not seem fair. Above all, Teacher 2 questioned "how do you put kids in a class, you know, where you think… where the potential to fail is higher than the potential to be successful?" Since teaching in an honors-for-all school, Teacher 2 recognized that "the word 'tracked' has some negative connotations to it… But I do think there should be some tracking involved." Teacher 2, like Teacher 1, expressed support of open enrollment with separate honors and standard-level classes and felt that in an honors-for-all system "[honors] just becomes a label, when it's not 'honors…' not everyone needs to be in an honors-for-all" (T2, 12-12).

Teacher 3, unlike Teacher 1 and Teacher 2, was in favor of detracking and honors-for-all and remained in support of the new programming after its implementation. Teacher 3 stated she always believed that all students should have access to honors-level material and felt that honors-for-all,

> …only… reiterated the fact of… who are we choosing for honors classes, and whether or not we are choosing in an equitable or even accurate way…. Again, I think it's just kind of confirmed that often teachers have in their minds what an honors student looks like and acts like, whether that is correct about their intellect or their desire to do well, or any of those things. I think, you know, there is a certain expectation of behavior that comes

> with honors students that I don't… that I think all teachers should kind of question why they think that. (T3, 12-15).

After seeing the academic progress Teacher 3's students made over the course of the programming, she believes that "honors-for-all, if done well, can be really great for students" (T3, 12-15). However, while all students deserve access to rigor, Teacher 3 also expressed that "an honors-for-all title" does not need to be the way to open access and schools should reevaluate how they identify students for honors-level courses (T3, 12-15).

Defining what "Honors" Means

District's Definition of "Honors"

Central School District has vague language about what makes a class honors. According to the district's public website on middle school honors courses, "Honors classes in middle school are open to all students who seek academic rigor. Central School District offers open enrollment in Honors social studies, English, science, and mathematics classes." The site further defines honors classes as

> …based on extensions of Central School District's Program of Studies. Extensions… add depth and complexity to student learning experiences…. Students in honors courses frequently use abstract, critical thinking approaches through inquiry-based projects to extend and deepen understanding of the content. Honors courses prepare students for future success in the next step of their academic journey. (D19)

Central School District's gifted education program further defines honors classes as adding "increased depth and complexity in specific subjects" with "students learn[ing] with other students who chosen to be challenged academically" (D10).

Curricular Differences

Curricular differences between honors and standard-level classes across the core content areas of English, science, and social studies are minimal, according to Central School District's course catalog on its public website (D25). Descriptions of the honors and standard-level classes are displayed in Appendix E. The course descriptions revealed slight differences between the honors and standard-level courses, using verbiage in the honors-level explanations such as "extended through research-based practices" and providing "learning opportunities that enhance independent work habits" (D25). However, honors mathematics classes at the middle school level contain different standards with the honors-level following the curricular standards of the next grade level. For example, Mathematics 6 Honors has the same curriculum as Mathematics 7 (D25). Data analysis on the honors mathematics at Central School District are discussed in the challenges in practice section.

Additionally, according to Central School District's official regulation on the standard instructional program and instructional grouping to support differentiation and placement in content areas, states that "all secondary courses are defined by the program of studies" meaning that "course offerings will not be modified by either reducing the number of objectives or simplifying the complexity of objectives for the purpose of providing different levels of the same course" (D18). This regulation directs schools and teachers to follow the curricula such that although honors and standard-level classes in English, science, and social studies are nearly identical, teachers cannot modify the standards to provide differentiation between levels unless it is to provide enrichment and extensions (D18).

Determining Honors Criteria

With a loose definition of "honors" provided by the district and the minimal curricular differences between honors and standard level in the majority of the core content areas, Central Middle School needed to determine how they would define what makes a class "honors" in a detracked setting (DOA, 12-15). In the initial planning phases of implementing honors-for-all, Central Middle School leadership facilitated conversations among staff as to what constituted an honors-level class (D12). Early suggestions by staff included primarily lists of characteristics student who enrolls in an honors class should possess, such as an interest in the subject, a desire to be challenged and dive deeper into the content, intrinsic motivation to be successful, executive functioning skills, and an ability to work independently and actively engage with the material (D12).

Ultimately, the school decided to define honors-level classes on what type of tasks students would have access to instead of student characteristics and behaviors that were stereotypical of an "honors" student to move away from limiting access to rigorous coursework (DOA, 12-15; P, 12-10). According to the Principal, the instruction should be the determining factor if a class should be labeled "honors" and "an honors student doesn't have to look a certain way or be a certain way like… they might stereotypically think" (P, 12-10). The definition Central School District produced was: "Teachers deliver high quality, rigorous instruction with students engaging in high quality academic tasks and using the skills learned to tackle complex problems" (D14). The school then needed to define what a "high quality, rigorous instruction" and "high quality academic task" means. After brainstorming with the school community (D7), the school created the definition that "high quality, rigorous instruction… teach[es] content that is appropriately challenging for students but that also engages students in higher level thinking

and academic conversations" and that "high quality academic tasks… are authentic, open-ended, relevant to students' lives, and give students opportunities for choice" (D8). By creating school-wide common language and determining the criteria of what makes a class "honors," Central Middle School hoped to mitigate inequities by providing what they defined "honors" instruction to be to all students (DOA, 12-15; P, 12-10).

Teachers' Definitions of "Honors"

Although Central Middle School had determined what defines an "honors" class, the teacher participants in this study had their own views about what "honors" means based on their experiences before honors-for-all began. Teacher 1 believed that students should have the choice to take honors classes based on their interest level and a desire to be challenged. He also stated another distinction between honors and standard-level classes is the expectations teachers have in their honors classes that students will "push deeper," engage in more critical thinking, and that the teacher is "asking for more, the standard is more so instead of two paragraphs, I want four…." (T1, 12-7). For Teacher 2, students enrolled in advanced class "want to take on… some extra responsibilities," are prepared for increased academic rigor and a faster pace and have a "willingness to try." In addition, Teacher 2 thought that honors classes are "more rigorous," have "more project-based learning," "opportunities to explore," and have "much more creativity" than standard-level courses (T2, 12-12). Teacher 3, on the other hand, stressed that it is the quality of instruction, not the student that makes a class advanced. Teacher 3 defined rigorous instruction as using "more reading and writing and diving deeper into specific content areas," including "challenging the students do more of the thinking and the writing on their own" and the "opportunity to research more." Teacher 3 argued that

> …often teachers have in their minds what an 'honors student' looks like and acts like, whether that is correct about their intellect or their desire to do well or any of those things, I think… there is a certain expectation of behavior that comes with 'honors student' that… I think all teachers should kind of question why they think that. (T3, 12-15)

Instructional Shifts in Honors-for-All Classrooms

Despite the mixed opinions among staff on the honors-for-all programming and differing beliefs about tracking, pedagogy at Central Middle School has changed since implementation of the new detracked programming (D3; D5; D6; D7; D22; D24; DOA, 12-15; IC, 12-7; P, 12-10; T1, 12-7; T2, 12-12; T3, 12-15). To meet Central Middle School's definitions of "high quality, rigorous instruction" and "high quality academic task" (D7), teachers learned and adopted new pedagogical strategies and tools that changed their planning, instruction, and assessment practices. These new pedagogical skills and strategies included using the engagement/workshop model, small group instruction, scaffolds and differentiation and blended learning and project-based learning. In addition, teachers were given support in using these new instructional skills and strategies in the classroom (D3; D5; D6; D7; D22; D24; DOA, 12-15; IC, 12-7; P, 12-10; T1, 12-7; T2, 12-12; T3, 12-15). One of the aspects of honors-for-all that surprised the District Office Administrator was "the openness of teachers to try new things and to push themselves" despite the mixed opinions on the new detracked programming (DOA, 12-15).

Pedagogical Strategies and Tools

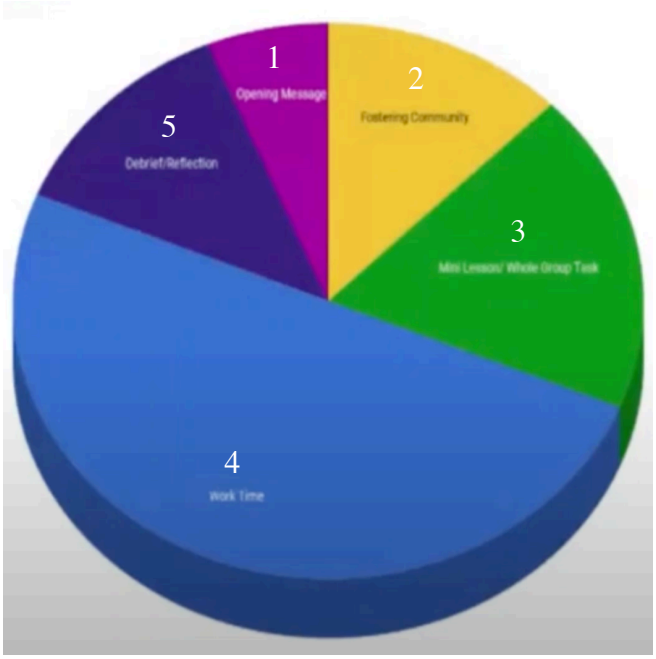
Engagement/Workshop Model. One of the main instructional changes that occurred when Central Middle School transitioned to honors-for-all was the adoption of the engagement model, also known as the workshop model, as shown in Figure 2. In the workshop model,

teachers begin the lesson with a short opening message and then move into a community-building activity. The lesson then moves into a mini lesson with whole group instruction and tasks, followed by student work time and ending with a debrief of the day's lesson and an opportunity for reflection. A key component of the engagement model is that roughly 50% of the lesson consists of student work time, in which students should be completing high quality academic tasks (D14).

Figure 2

Engagement/Workshop Model at Central Middle School[2]

1. Opening Message
2. Fostering Community
3. Mini Lesson/Whole Group Task
4. Work Time
5. Debrief/Reflection



According to the District Office Administrator, the engagement model was not the structure of lessons for most teachers across the school prior to honors-for-all implementation and usage varied by teacher and department, with many teachers relying on teacher-centered lectures to deliver lessons (DOA, 12-15). However, the District Office Administrator stated there

[2] Engagement Model graphic retrieved from video of parent information session on honors-for-all on Central Middle School's website.

"was an openness to it" and that distance learning the year before had actually helped teachers transition to using the engagement model, when teachers received instruction on "how we spend our 80 minutes in virtual" (DOA, 12-15). Having teachers use the workshop model to plan and deliver lessons "[took] away this idea that workshop is just an elementary thing and what the purpose of it was, so that kids actually engaged in the task and no just… listening to teachers lecture" (DOA, 12-15).

Small Group Instruction. Almost every participant interviewed referenced small group instruction as a new instructional focus at Central Middle School since implementation of honors-for-all as a way to meet the distinct learning needs of every student in the class (DOA, 12-15; IC, 12-7; P, 12-10; T1, 12-7; T3, 12-15). Looking back, the District Office Administrator stated that using small group instruction was not something all teachers were practicing before honors-for-all began and that small group instruction was a mental shift for teachers that "we can't just teach to the whole class and expect the whole class to get it" (DOA, 12-15). According to the Principal, the benefits of small groups instruction "not only are you able to support your students with intervention, but you could also do extension with that as well" (P, 12-10). Teacher 1 described small group instruction in the heterogeneously mixed honors classes as "you just kind of break up the groups based on need and you sort of float around as a teacher" (T1, 12-7). Professional development and tools were also provided at the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year for teachers to learn how to plan lessons within the engagement model using small groups, including how pull small groups using data and evidence of student learning, planning targeted lessons for small group instruction based on students' needs, and classroom management strategies to be able to pull small groups while the rest of the class is working (D21, D22).

Scaffolds and Differentiation. Most participants also cited scaffolding and differentiation as an instructional focus in an honors-for-all setting (IC, 12-7; P, 12-10; T1, 12-7; T3, 12-15). Intended as a complement to the engagement model and small group instruction, providing scaffolds and differentiation was adopted in planning, instructional delivery, and assessment practices to various learning needs within the classroom. From the Instructional Coach's perspective,

> …a lot of it is in the planning, just thinking about… who are the learners in the room… what are the scaffolds and supports that can be put in place for different lessons. And also, just thinking about different resources and different strategies that can be used by all students to access the honors curriculum. (IC, 12-7)

The Instructional Coach believed that scaffolding is an essential component to ensure all students can be successful in the honors-for-all setting. He expressed his opinion that exposure to rigorous content is beneficial to students, but only if students are given the supports to access the material. The Instructional Coach also stressed that scaffolds are not just for students who are English Language Learners or eligible for special education services, stating "we know that the strategies that work and the scaffolds that work for students that are… in those team-taught classes are just good for everybody" (IC, 12-7).

Teacher 3 also shared an example of how differentiation allowed her students to access a project-based assessment that required students to classify and analyze historical events to answer the question: "did African Americans gain equality during Reconstruction?" (T3, 12-15). Scaffolds and differentiation were provided to either push students or offer support, such as varying the number of events to classify and analyze, classifying events for students who are struggling, and providing sentence starters for students who need extra help writing the final

paragraph while other students may be able to write the paragraph independently. “So they’re all doing the same assessment, but which version they get is based off of where we think their skills are to be able to access that assessment” (T3, 12-15).

Blended Learning and Project-Based Learning. Half of the interview participants also referenced blended learning and project-based learning practices to support honors-for-all instruction in conjunction with the engagement model, small group instruction, and scaffolds and supports (DOA, 12-15; IC, 12-7; P, 12-10; T3, 12-15). During 2022-2023 school year, professional development was delivered by the Central School District instructional office to support teachers in using project-based learning (DOA, 12-15; T3, 12-15). According to the Instructional Coach and Teacher 3, project-based and performance-based assessments were the primary method of assessing students in social studies classes. However, from Teacher 3’s perspective, the project-based learning professional development teachers received

> …was actually really beneficial for honors-for-all… when we are assessing that project-based learning format it is… we’re doing the rigor, like those are… things we would be doing in an honors-level class and then we can scaffold it to make sure all students accessed it.” (T3, 12-15)

During the 2023-2024 school year, Central School District provided teacher training on blended learning strategies as a way to keep students engaged in high quality academic tasks during student work time (D24; P, 12-10; T3, 12-15). During the teacher return week in the 2023-2024 school year, teachers were required to complete modules on blended learning strategies, including what blended learning is and best practices in using technology in the classroom, how to utilize blended learning in conjunction with small group instruction, and classroom management strategies with blended learning (D21; D24). Teacher 3 described how

she incorporated blended learning and "using technology to allow students to… choose their own path, work at their own pace, and often… completing their own product" (T3, 12-15):

> For… my class, like what we typically do is… choice boards. So when we are giving notes, I give the option to start out to introduce a unit, students can either do a reading or they can watch a BrainPOP video. And then they get to do that at their own pace. When they're done with that, they move on to the actual like notes portion, and that notes portion would either be listening to me read through the slides and telling them to stop and when to answer questions, or they can go through the slideshow on their own and answer the questions. And then the third thing would be some type of product that they are creating. And then, once students are working in that format that also allows me to be working with students that might need more targeted instruction or targeted help. (T3, 12-15)

Support for Teachers

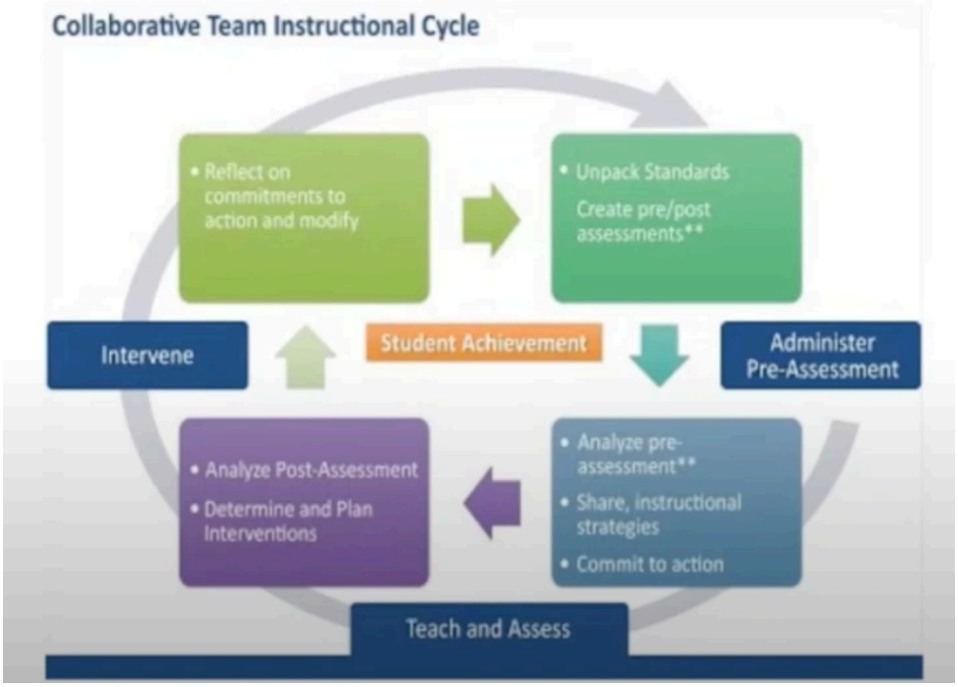
Central Middle School also provided support for teachers' development and proficiency in using the engagement model, small group instruction, scaffolds and differentiation, and blended learning and project-based learning instructional practices (DOA, 12-15; IC, 12-7; P, 12-10; T1, 12-7; T2, 12-12; T3, 12-15). Emphasizing collaboration, ongoing professional development, and utilizing resource teachers and coaches, teachers generally felt supported navigating the new instructional tools and strategies as part of the honors-for-all initiative (T2, 12-12; T3, 12-15).

Collaboration. Central Middle School used professional learning communities and a collaborative team structure for teachers to work together. Within a collaborative team at Central Middle School, all teachers who instruct the same grade level content—including the ESOL and

special education teachers—meet together with an instructional coach and resource teachers to plan lessons, assess students, and provide intervention to support students' academic mastery of the content, as displayed in Figure 3 (D14; IC, 12-7; P, 12-10).

Figure 3

Central Middle School's Collaborative Team Instructional Cycle[3]



In the initial phases of implementing the honors-for-all plan, the District Office Administrator explained that professional development was provided to collaborative team leaders—teacher leaders who facilitate the work of the collaborative team—to understand how to build in rigor throughout the collaborative team instructional cycle, beginning with unpacking the curricular standards for a given unit. Collaborative team members worked together to create authentic, engaging, and rigorous activities that meet the school's definition of "high quality academic tasks" using blended learning, project-based learning, small group instruction, and

[3] Collaborative Team Instructional Cycle graphic retrieved from video of parent information session on honors-for-all on Central Middle School's website.

scaffolds within the engagement model (D3; D7; DOA, 12-15). The Principal also commented that planning, instruction, and assessment practices at Central Middle School since honors-for-all began have also changed by being "tighter with our instruction in our collaborative teams" (D3; P, 12-10). Both the Principal and Instructional Coach also credited the ESOL and special education collaborative team members in supporting all students in an honors setting. The contributions of the ESOL and special education teachers, particularly in providing scaffolds, allowed the team to create lessons and assessments that expose students to rigorous content while making the tasks accessible for all learners (IC, 12-7). In addition to being stronger contributors to collaborative teams, the Principal also noted that in "many of our collaborative teams our special education and ESOL teachers are even the collaborative team lead…" (P, 12-10). The support from ESOL and special education teachers also extended into expanding the number of team-taught honors classes to provide support to both colleagues and students within the classroom (D1; P, 12-10).

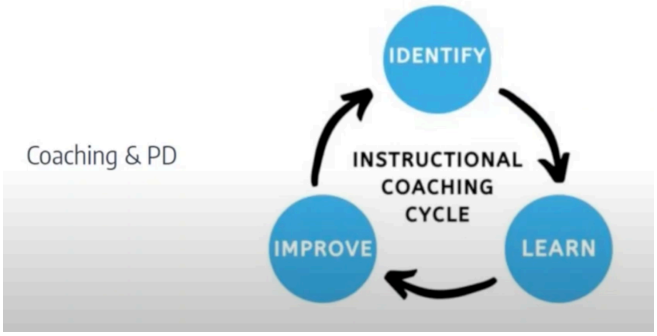
Professional Development. While Central Middle School did not specifically create professional development that was titled as specific to honors-for-all (DOA, 12-15; IC, 12-7; P, 12-10; T3, 12-15), teacher training was provided around instructional practices and advanced academics (D8; DOA, 12-15; IC, 12-7; P, 12-10; T1, 12-7; T2, 12-12; T3, 12-15). Professional development was normally school-led and delivered by the instructional coaches, the gifted resource teacher who is also the school's IB coordinator, and school leadership (DOA, 12-15; IC, 12-7; P, 12-10; T1, 12-7; T3, 12-15). These trainings were either embedded during collaborative team meetings, presented in faculty meetings on teacher work days during staff return week in August and throughout the school year, or provided as summer learning opportunities by the gifted resource teacher (D21; D22; D24; DOA, 12-15; IC, 12-7; P, 12-10; T1, 12-7). Teacher 3

shared her opinion that the professional development provided by the school, especially in project-based learning and blended learning, has helped her teach in an honors-for-all setting and that collaborative teams are incorporating the new strategies when creating lesson activities and assessments (T3, 12-15). In addition to the school-led professional development, Central School District's instructional services office personnel have also trained teachers at Central Middle School on project-based learning, working with English Language Learners and students with disabilities, and the gifted resource teachers has helped teachers receive their gifted education certification (DOA, 12-15; IC, 12-7; P, 12-10; T2, 12-12).

Support Personnel. Central Middle School faculty credited the work of support personnel in helping teachers adopt new instructional strategies and support students (DOA, 12-15; IC, 12-7; P, 12-10; T2, 12-12). Central Middle School's gifted resource teacher and IB coordinator was credited as "an invaluable resource" and "chang[ing] the game, really having somebody with… rigor at the front of mind as their job… and being embedded in collaborative teams, that made a difference in planning" (DOA, 12-15). The Principal also praised that gifted resource teacher in "making it visible and making it easy for teachers to have… access to different [professional development] opportunities" (P, 12-10). Instructional coaches, who assist teachers with planning and "thinking about… who are the learners in the room… and also just thinking about different resources and different strategies that can be used by all students to access the honors curriculum" (D14; IC, 12-7), were also noted as supporting teachers in instructing in an honors-for-all setting. As displayed in Figure 4, instructional coaches led teachers and collaborative teams in identifying areas of pedagogical growth, learning new strategies, and facilitating instructional improvement.

Figure 4

Central Middle School's Coaching and Professional Development Model[4]



Teacher 2 stated that "we have a great math coach…. Our technology specialist has, and… the math coach like whatever we like need, they're right there" and described them as "lifesavers without a doubt" (T2, 12-12). In addition to school personnel supporting teachers, the District Office Administrator also stated that administrators at Central Middle School were also supported in the honors-for-all effort from district offices, especially the ESOL and gifted education departments (DOA, 12-15).

Challenges in Practice

Despite the supports provided to teachers to instruct in an honors-for-all setting, challenges arose (DOA, 12-15; IC, 12-7; P, 12-10; T1, 12-7; T2, 12-12; T3, 12-15). Teaching to heterogeneously mixed honors class proved difficult in trying to differentiate for students' needs, mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the unique curricular differences in mathematics. Upon reflection, the District Office Administrator commented that it was a "even… a challenge for those teachers and teams who were really committed to [honors-for-all]" (DOA, 12-15).

[4] Coaching and Professional Development graphic retrieved from video of parent information session on honors-for-all on Central Middle School's website.

Differentiating for Students' Needs

All of the participants acknowledged during their interviews that the honors-for-all classes at Central Middle School served a wide range of diverse needs (DOA, 12-15; IC, 12-17; P, 12-10; T1, 12-7; T2, 12-12; T3, 12-15). The Principal stated that having "such great [learning] needs within our classrooms, and really implementing honors-for-all with fidelity has been a question that has come up over and over within our staff" (P, 12-10). The Instructional Coach observed that

> …at times it feels… really difficult because they have students in such different places, coming with a ton of background knowledge or not really having any at all on the content. And then adding into that… if it's an honors-for-all team-taught class and you look at reading levels and you have some students who their reading is, you know pretty high Lexile [reading level], they're reading a high school or… at a collegiate level and then other students in that same room who are on a third grade level… how many different levels of text do you need in one classroom? How do we find something that's going to support our students who are struggling and then also how are we gonna push students who already understand this and not make it feel like it's extra work for them? (IC, 12-7)

The challenge of attempting to meet various learning needs in the classroom had both academic and behavioral consequences (D11, DOA, 12-15; IC, 12-7; T1, 12-7: T3, 12-15). The District Office Administrator acknowledged that "differentiation would be the hardest part of it" and questioned "how do you prepare a teacher to manage a classroom that's go that many different needs?" (DOA, 12-15). In Teacher 1's experience,

> … the kids who typically have the biggest behavior problems are the ones who need the most, like who are the furthest behind academically. And if you group them together in a class, well, then, you spend all your time monitoring and correcting behavior rather than floating around, and rather than getting to the higher-achievers. (T1, 12-7)

Teacher 1 also lamented that high-achievers were "slipping through the cracks" and for students who finished the assigned tasks early, the enrichment and extension work given became "extra busy work to keep them busy while you deal with the behavior issues, or you deal with sort of the middle part of the class in terms of skill level." (T1, 12-7). Teacher 3, a supporter of honors-for-all, also admitted that "even with all of those tools… I know there are students that we're missing at both [ends of the achievement spectrum]" and that the honors-for-all setting can be "overwhelming for teachers" (T3, 12-15).

In an attempt to ensure success for as many students in his classes as possible, Teacher 1 admitted that

> I have to kind of make it the easiest assignment that we give or choose a lot of easy assignments, or else I'm gonna have, you know, you gotta try to find something that fits sort of the lowest common denominator. And that's a terrible thing to say, but that's I feel like what sort of is being pushed just through the reality of that class. (T1, 12-7).

Teacher 1 also felt that small group instruction, while great in theory, was unrealistic in practice:

> How are you supposed to teach two to three different types of lessons all at once, while floating around five different groups, while managing behaviors, like while going deep into critical thought, while also getting the basics down with scaffolding and differentiating, like it's just it's too much to do with a room full of 25 to 30 kids. (T1, 12-7)

Ultimately everyone interviewed believed that teachers were trying their best to meet all of the learning needs of their students (DOA, 12-15; IC, 12-7; P, 12-10; T1, 12-7; T2, 12-12; T3, 12-15), but Teacher 1 summarized the general feeling from teachers that "you get pulled both ways, and you can't possibly serve both, not effectively, not as much as you want" (T1, 12-7).

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic

In addition to challenges with differentiation, beginning the honors-for-all programming the first year fully in-person after the COVID-19 pandemic was also difficult (DOA, 12-15; P, 12-10; T3, 12-15). The District Office Administrator shared that the teachers who were skeptical about honors-for-all also questioned the timing of the new programming after having spent nearly two years in distance learning. However, the District Office Administrator responded with "what better time? Like, do we really want to come out of the pandemic with the same inequities that we entered it with?" (DOA, 12-15). However, she also recognized that "coming back from the pandemic was challenging with behaviors. Getting kids back into what school feels like. So, I think that contributed to some of the challenges that we saw with implementation" (DOA, 12-15). The Principal also acknowledged that students struggled with "behavior, attention, focus, [and] stamina" returning to in-person learning post-COVID-19 and loss of much of the initial group of teachers due to educators leaving the profession due to the pandemic affected the "level of engagement of being on board with honors-for-all" (P, 12-10).

Teacher 3 also felt that starting honors-for-all immediately after returning to in-person learning post-pandemic complicated the success of the new programming.

> I will also say that this has been hard because it's all happened during COVID and, as you probably know, education after COVID… it has been a struggle to even get to what felt like normalcy pre-COVID. So then, to throw in the honors-for-all, I'm not sure we

> are getting an accurate perception of what it is like. Truly, because again, we are just trying to rebound from some of those learning gaps that have taken place because of COVID…. I think it's hard because education in general, right now, I mean, it's just been a challenging few years, and I think it is very unfortunate that this is, it's all happening at the same time…. And I think it can be really great for teachers as well, but I think it's just unfortunate kind of the timing that it has all happened. (T3, 12-15)

Mathematics

The curricular differences between honors and standard-level mathematics in Central School District also complicated the honors-for-all initiative. According to the district's webpage on honors courses, "in middle school mathematics, an honors course accelerates the student to the next grade level" (D19), meaning that students who enrolled in honors mathematics essentially skipped a whole grade level of mathematics study. During the first year of the honors-for-all programming in 2021-2022, the District Office Administrator stated the school "slowed down math initially" and offered both Mathematics 6 and Mathematics 6 Honors (DOA, 12-15). According to the Principal, mathematics was complicated because not all of the feeder elementary schools offered advanced Mathematics 5, so moving from Mathematics 5 to Mathematics 6 Honors was having students skip sixth grade content (P, 12-10).

However, according to Teacher 2, the following year in 2022-2023 all sixth graders moved into Mathematics 7 Honors—which follows the Mathematics 8 standards—creating a division of background knowledge within the class. Teacher 2 shared this created a "burden" among Mathematics 7 Honors teachers trying to "balance" between the students who had learned the seventh grade standards and those who had not. Ultimately, "the focus… was on the students with the greatest need, not the students that were on grade level" (T2, 12-12). Teacher 2 said the

experience was a “nightmare” and that “it was awful as a teacher to feel like I was setting kids up for failure…. It was unfair to the students. It was unfair to the teachers” (T2, 12-12). Aligned with the Central School District’s 2023-2030 Strategic Plan goal of “successful completion of Algebra I by eighth grade” (D26; DOA, 12-15), the original honors-for-all programming was to culminate in Algebra I Honors for all eighth graders. However, based on feedback from the mathematics teachers, Central Middle School decided to slow down the mathematics progress further, using standardized test scores as the determinant for placement instead of teacher recommendations (D15; T2, 12-12). As a result, Teacher 2 has many of the same students in her Mathematics 8 class as she had in her Mathematics 7 Honors class the year before and

> …we just see the brokenness in the kids. The kids are doing below grade level, even though this is the second year that they’ve seen the content, they are still well behind. Like they just have no initiative. They don’t care.” (T2, 12-12)

Summary of the Findings

The detracked, honors-for-all programming at Central Middle School affected teachers’ beliefs on school tracking systems, what “honors” means, their pedagogy as presented in this chapter in four categories of findings. These major categories were: (a) Opinions on Honors-for-All, (b) Defining what “Honors” Means, (c), Instructional Shifts in an Honors-for-All Classroom, and (d) Challenges in Practice.

Participants interviewed and document analysis revealed that in general, teachers’ beliefs about tracking and honors classes did not change after implementation of the honors-for-all programming at Central Middle School. Teachers who were in favor of open enrollment tracked systems with separate honors and standard-level classes, had the same opinion after teaching in a detracked setting. Teachers who were in favor of detracking also held the same views after

instructing in an honors-for-all classroom. Teachers' beliefs of what criteria defines a class as "honors" also remained constant before and after the school detracked. While the school created their own definitions of what "honors" means based on the quality of the tasks students are assigned, teachers who were generally not in favor of honors-for-all, felt that honors classes should be an option for students who wanted to delve deeper into the content and were prepared for the rigor. Teachers in favor of detracking, on the other hand, agreed with Central Middle School's stance that the quality of the instruction and activities, not the student, is what makes a class advanced.

Despite the mixed views, instruction in Central Middle School changed after implementation of honors-for-all. Teachers adopted new strategies and pedagogical skills to structure and plan their lessons, including incorporating the engagement/workshop model, small group instruction, scaffolds and differentiation, blended learning, and project-based learning. To support teachers in using these tools and meet the needs of all the students in their classrooms, teachers received support through collaboration, professional development, and support personnel within the school and from district offices. However, in spite of teachers' best efforts, the work of honors-for-all had proven challenging. Attempting to differentiate for diverse learners at various skill levels, the complicated nature of education after the COVID-19 pandemic, and the curricular differences between honors and standard-level mathematics had overwhelmed teachers. Chapter 5 will present a discussion of the findings, implications, recommendations for future study, and a conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how a middle school's newly adopted detracking policy with an honors-for-all approach impacted teachers' beliefs and pedagogy. Specifically, this study intended to discover how teaching in a detracked setting affected what teachers believe about tracking and honors and how their instruction changed to ensure all students could be academically successful in advanced classes that are heterogeneously mixed in terms of ability. In a school district where honors-for-all is becoming a trend, middle schools currently lie along a continuum of completely detracked to tracking with open enrollment honors. This research sought to provide an understanding of teachers' perspectives in one of the first middle schools to offer honors-for-all as an increasing number of schools consider detracking. The findings of the study were presented in Chapter 4. In this chapter, the findings, as related to the research questions, are discussed. Chapter 5 begins with a discussion of the findings, then presents the implications, recommendations for future study, and ends with a conclusion.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis of the interview and document data were guided by the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 1 and the literature review presented in Chapter 2. The conceptual framework for this study theorized that where a school lies on the detracking—tracking continuum can impact teachers' beliefs about tracking and honors which may affect their pedagogy (Bernhardt, 2018; Sørensen, 1970). The themes from the literature review included: (a) race and bias in track placement, (b) teacher quality and pedagogical differences between tracks, (c) student achievement between tracks, and (d) socio-emotional effects of

tracking. Both the conceptual framework and literature review themes provide a basis for the interpretation of the findings.

Finding 1 – Opinions on Honors-for-All

The first finding, that answers the first two research questions on teachers' beliefs on tracking and honors courses, was that teachers' opinions on tracking and honors classes did not change after implementation of the honors-for-all programming. Furthermore, there was a general divide in opinion between the teachers and the non-teaching faculty. Teacher 1 (12-7) and Teacher 2 (12-12) were skeptical of honors-for-all from conception and felt strongly after implementation that open enrollment honors classes should be an option. These two teachers also felt that honors-for-all did not positively impact students academically or socio-emotionally, nor did it mitigate educational inequities. On the other hand, Teacher 3 (12-15), the Instructional Coach (12-7), the Principal (12-10) and the District Office Administrator (12-15) were in favor of honors-for-all before and after implementation of the detracked programming and believed it positively impacted students academically and socio-emotionally and promoted equity.

In the literature, educational researchers have engaged in ongoing debate as to whether secondary schools should continue the practice of tracking (Francis & Darity, 2021; Kitsantas et al., 2017; Loveless, 1999; Moller & Stearns, 2012; Oakes, 2005). Pro-tracking researchers believe that tracking can have socio-emotional benefits (Kitsantas et al., 2017) and improved learning outcomes for students (Loveless, 2009, 2016). Anti-tracking researchers, on the other hand, argue that tracking produces inequities that have socio-emotional and moral consequences (Lofton, 2019; Oakes, 2005; Stanley & Venzant Chambers, 2018). The debate found in the literature was mirrored in the differing opinions about Central Middle School's honors-for-all programming, with some teachers wanting to return to an open enrollment system with separate

honors and standard-level classes and others believing that detracking and honors-for-all benefits students (T1, 12-7; T2, 12-12; T3, 12-15). Interestingly, the experience of teaching in an honors-for-all setting seemed to confirm the beliefs teachers already held instead of changing their opinions on tracking and honors, as theorized in the conceptual framework.

Academic impact. This study found that Central Middle School teachers' opinions on the academic impact of honors-for-all were mixed. Perspectives of the academic impact of detracking ranged from having a detrimental effect on students at both ends of the achievement spectrum (T1, 12-7; T2, 12-12) to seeing growth in students' skills (T3, 12-15). Similarly, research on tracking and its impact on student achievement has been mixed. While some studies have found that enrollment in advanced classes has a positive impact on the test scores of high-achievers and gifted learners (Card & Giuliano, 2016; Colgrin & Sappington, 2015), other studies found that tracking widens the achievement gap between higher- and lower-achieving students (Domina et al., 2019; Mickelson, 2015). In detracked settings, research has also found mixed results ranging from detracking having little effect on test scores (Atteberry et al., 2019), having a positive impact on test scores (Conway, 2021; Meckler, 2023b), or having a detrimental effect on students' achievement on standardized testing (Loveless, 2016; Mazzeo, 2010). Loveless, an advocate for tracking, has found in his research that heterogeneously mixed classes can lead to a learning loss for average and high achievers (Loveless, 1999).

Socio-emotional impact. This case study on Central Middle School found that while the administrators generally felt that detracking led to more positive academic self-perceptions based on anecdotal data and comments from students and families (DOA, 12-15; P, 12-10), the teachers observed the opposite. Central Middle School teachers explained that many students were not aware that they were taking an honors course and teachers stated it was not necessarily

advertised or mentioned during class (T1, 12-7; T3, 12-15). Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 both felt that in the honors-for-all setting, students who may not have chosen honors in the open enrollment system were negatively impacted after detracking (T1, 12-7; T2, 12-12). This could potentially relate to the big-fish-in-a-little-pond effect where students compare themselves to the class the average that is likely higher in an honors-for-all class than in a tracked, standard-level class (Cash & Lin, 2022). Related to Cash and Lin's findings (2022), Central Middle School's Teacher 3 also wondered if teachers discussed with students that they are in an honors class, would it "build up students' confidence?" (T3, 12-15). The Instructional Coach also noted the social benefit of having students interact with peers they would not normally be in contact with in a tracked setting as a benefit of honors-for-all, a point not found in the research reviewed (IC, 12-7).

The research on the socio-emotional impacts of tracking has generally found that tracking can affect students' academic self-perceptions and education expectations (Conway, 2021; Karlson, 2015; Legette, 2018; Modica, 2015; Stanley & Venzant Chambers, 2018). Most of the findings have pointed to negative socio-emotional impacts for lower-tracked students that are especially prevalent in minority youth who may internalize negative stereotypes that imply lower academic ability with race (Legette, 2018; Modica, 2015; Stanley & Venzant Chambers, 2018). Additionally, students enrolled in gifted programs can experience negative self-perceptions, such as the big-fish-in-a-little-pond effect (Cash & Lin, 2022; Kitsantas et al., 2017).

Equity. Central Middle School leadership presented equity and disproportionality in enrollment data before detracking as one of the primary reasons for advocating for honors-for-all (D7; D8; DOA, 12-15; P, 12-10; T1, 12-7). Four out of six of the participants in this study seemed to agree that honors-for-all was beneficial to equity efforts by removing barriers to

access to rigorous content and not selecting students for honors classes based on behavior and non-academic variables (Bernhardt, 2018; DOA, 12-15; IC, 12-7; P, 12-10; T3, 12-15). The District Office Administrator questioned why students were not opting to take honors classes that may relate to the study conducted by Witenko et al. (2017) that Latinx students were not encouraged to take AP classes from their regular classroom teacher and found sources of encouragement elsewhere (DOA, 12-15). After honors-for-all was implemented, disparities in enrollment among demographic groups disappeared, except for a small subset of students with disabilities who require access to a modified curriculum and newcomer English Language Learners at a level 1 or 2 English Language Proficiency based on the WIDA ACCESS for ELLs exam (D13). The perspectives from Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 also beg the question how a school or district defines "equity." While most of the participants saw honors-for-all as opening access to underrepresented groups, Teacher 2 opined that not giving students the option to choose their classes and suggesting that "one-size-fits-all… goes against [equity]" (T2, 12-12). Similarly, Teacher 1 questioned why discussions on equity only examined groups when individuals within groups have a wide range of needs (T1, 12-7).

Central Middle School's data on the disparities in honors enrollment among student subgroups before honors-for-all implementation presented in this study (D7) was similar to the findings in current research on tracking and equity. Studies have found that there is a racial divide between advanced and lower-tracked classes (Colgrin & Sappington, 2015; Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Legette, 2018; Lofton, 2019; Mickelson, 2015; Modica, 2015; Stanley & Venzant Chambers, 2018; Witenko et al., 2017). The de facto segregation that results is often due to bias in placement decisions influenced by non-academic factors, such as behavior, race, and socio-economic background (Bernhardt, 2014; Card & Giuliano, 2016; Lofton, 2019; Modica, 2015).

In addition, open enrollment has also been found to not result in more diverse classes (Corra et al., 2011; Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019; Witenko et al., 2017). This study found that open enrollment is the official policy of Central School District that Central Middle School had previously practiced before honors-for-all programming began (D18; DOA, 12-15).

In all three areas—academic, socio-emotional, and equity—teachers' perspectives and observations aligned with their overall beliefs on tracking and honors classes.

Finding 2 – Defining What "Honors" Means

The second finding, that answers the second research question on teachers' beliefs about honors courses, was that there was not a common consensus of what "honors" means across the district, school, and staff. The district's definition of "honors" was ambiguous (D19), and described insignificant curricular differences between honors and standard-level classes in English, science, and social studies (D25). The school created of a definition of "honors" in an attempt to keep instruction at an "honors" level and have a common understanding among staff (D8; DOA, 12-15; P, 12-10). However, teachers' views of what "honors" means included characteristics teachers felt students enrolled in honors courses should possess. Teachers' definitions of "honors" aligned to their beliefs about tracking (T1, 12-7; T2, 12-12; T3, 12-15).

The current research on tracking has not examined what defines a course as "honors" and curricular differences between tracks. However, tracking research has found that non-academic factors, such as race, behavior, socio-economic status, work ethic, and motivation can influence teachers' and counselors' recommendations for student course placement (Bernhardt, 2018; Francis et al., 2019), aligning to Teacher 3's concern about how students were selected for honors classes before Central Middle School detracked (T3, 12-15). These non-meritocratic variables also echo the initial discussions among Central Middle School faculty on what

"honors" means (D12). Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 also believed that students should have the choice to take honors classes based on their interest level in the content, desire to engage deeply in the content, and willingness to try and take on more responsibilities and in turn, teachers have higher expectations of the students enrolled in honors classes (T1, 12-7; T2, 12-12).

Finding 3 – Instructional Shifts in an Honors-for-all Classroom

The third finding, that answers the third research question on teachers' pedagogy, was that no matter how teachers felt about tracking, teachers shifted their instructional practices after implementation of honors-for-all to meet the diverse learning needs in the detracked classrooms. Based on the interviews and documents analyzed, teachers were provided professional development in using new instructional techniques to differentiate instruction while still maintaining rigor through student-centered activities that integrated choice, technology, and critical thinking. These new instructional techniques included using the engagement/workshop model, small group instruction, scaffolds and differentiation, and blended learning and project-based learning (D21; D22; D24; DOA, 12-15; IC, 12-7; P, 12-10; T1, 12-7; T2, 12-12; T3, 12-15). Teachers felt supported in using these new strategies and tools through ongoing training, collaboration with their grade-level teams, and support from the gifted resource teacher, technology specialist, and instructional coaches (DOA, 12-15; P, 12-10; T2, 12-12; T3, 12-15). Contrary to the conceptual framework used, it does not appear that the tracking and honors beliefs of the teachers who participated in this study impacted their willingness to adopt new instructional strategies and practices. Teacher 1, who expressed reservations about honors-for-all, explained that

> So we do a lot of cool stuff. I'm not saying we just do like I don't just give them like a worksheet, and say, you know, "turn this in" and go away for me. It's not like I do that, I never would do that. (T1, 12-7)

Although teachers had mixed opinions about honors-for-all, it was also clear that regardless of whether they liked or disliked the new programming, they all cared about their students and wanted them to be successful (T1, 12-7; T2, 12-12; T3, 12-15). The concern teachers have for their students' best interests and learning may have had more of an influence in their willingness to try new skills and strategies than the title of "honors-for-all."

Tracking research has found a discrepancy in the quality of instruction and pedagogical practices between different levels (Judson, 2017; Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Mayer et al., 2018; Oakes, 2005). Studies have found that lower- and standard-level classes often receive more direct instruction with students completing worksheets and activities based on rote memorization, while in advanced classes, students are engaged in small group learning, constructed responses, and tasks that promote critical thinking skills (Judson, 2017; Oakes, 2005). Although the tracking research did not explore how collaboration, professional development, and support personnel affects instruction across tracks, the pedagogical shifts that Central Middle School teachers made align with the types of instruction referenced in higher-tracked classes (Judson, 2017; Oakes, 2005).

Finding 4 – Challenges in Practice

The final finding, that answers the third research question on teachers' pedagogy, was that all participants, including those in favor of honors-for-all, expressed that teaching in a detracked classroom was challenging (DOA, 12-15; IC, 12-7; P, 12-10; T1, 12-7; T2, 12-12; T3, 12-15). The difficulties in teaching in an honors-for-all setting included differentiating for a wide

range of diverse learning needs (DOA, 12-15; IC, 12-7; P, 12-10; T1, 12-7; T2, 12-12; T3, 12-15), the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (DOA, 12-15; P, 12-10; T3, 12-15), and the accelerated standards in honors mathematics courses (DOA, 12-15; T2, 12-12).

Differentiating for students' needs and the impact of COVID-19 pandemic. In *The Tracking Wars,* Loveless cites that the difficulty of teaching in mixed-ability classes has been found in the research (1999). This was proven true for teachers, regardless of their opinions about honors-for-all (DOA, 12-15; IC, 12-7; P, 12-10; T1, 12-7; T2, 12-12; T3, 12-15). Teachers shared the difficulties of trying to meet every student where they were academically and that the highest- and lowest-achievers ended up "slipping through the cracks" (T1, 12-7; T3, 12-15). Compounded by the behavioral difficulties and learning gaps from the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers felt "overwhelmed" (DOA, 12-15; P, 12-10; T3, 12-15). A concern expressed by Teacher 1, in particular, was that high achievers who completed the tasks early received additional enrichment assignments that in actuality were more "busy work" than engaging (T1, 12-7). While there is limited findings in the tracking literature regarding differentiation and the impact of COVID-19, it is evident that teachers, who are all "trying to do their best" (T1, 12-7) need additional support with differentiation to ensure that no students are unintentionally ignored or forgotten and that enrichment activities provide engaging extensions to students who are at that level.

Mathematics. In a quantitative study conducted by Domina et al. (2016), the researchers examined how middle schools responded to a California initiative to offer Algebra I-for-all in eighth grade. The study found that between 2003 and 2013 enrollment in 8th grade Algebra I increased from 35% to 65% state-wide. In addition to the enrollment increase, the study found that schools serving large numbers of poor, Black, and Latinx students were more likely to

detrack and have all eighth graders take Algebra I. Schools also added remedial and basic eighth grade mathematics courses in more disadvantaged schools. In some cases, these remedial courses were to support students with low skills in Algebra I (Domina et al., 2016).

Central Middle School is a diverse school and its decision to detrack aligns with the findings from Domina et al.'s study. However, given the curricular differences between honors and standard-level mathematics in Central School District, additional intervention classes in the master schedule may be needed to prepare students for Algebra I (D1; Domina et al., 2016). Furthermore, although the initial goal of all eighth graders enrolling in Algebra I Honors matches the Central School District's 2023-2030 Strategic Plan (D26), the fact that honors mathematics courses have students skip a grade of content should have been considered with teacher feedback from the beginning versus approaching honors-for-all mathematics in the same way as the other core content areas (T2, 12-12).

Implications

The findings of this case study have practical implications for district leaders, administrators, teachers, curriculum developers, and instructional support personnel, such as instructional coaches and gifted resource teachers who make programming and tracking decisions.

Implication 1 – Teacher Buy-In

Having teacher buy-in is essential for making any major programming change work. This study found that the answer to the first two research questions—whether teachers' beliefs about tracking and honors classes changed since implementation of honors-for-all—was "no." Teachers' opinions and beliefs about honors-for-all and tracking remained the same before and after implementation of the detracked programming and all teachers expressed the

challenges of teaching in a heterogeneously-mixed classroom. However, despite the mixed opinions, it was evident that the teachers cared deeply about their students' success, learning, and well-being.

Recommendation: Start slow with teachers, collaborative teams, and departments who support detracking and honors-for-all. Having a smaller group of teachers willing to pilot honors-for-all who believe in the mission and are dedicated to the work will hopefully prevent disillusionment with the initiative, strengthen resiliency among teachers through the challenges that arise, and potentially limit teacher turnover. In addition, starting slow will allow instructional coaches and gifted resource teachers to provide more support to teachers involved in honors-for-all instead of spreading themselves across the school. A more grassroots, bottom-up approach may also be better received by the rest of the staff and teachers who pilot the program can help support their colleagues and model what an honors-for-all classroom looks and sounds like as the initiative spreads.

Implication 2 – Clear Definitions and Common Language

Having common language and clear definitions aligned to a school or district's mission and vision can foster a culture of honors-for-all. This study found that there were varying definitions of what "honors" means from the district, school, and staff. Central School District uses vague language to define honors courses and there are minimal differences in the course descriptions between honors and standard level classes in English, science, and social studies (D19; D25). Central Middle School, in recognition of the unclear language from the district, did create common definitions of "honors," "high quality, rigorous instruction," and "high quality academic tasks" (D12; DOA, 12-15). However, teachers continued to fall back on

their beliefs of what "honors" means and who should take honors classes (T1, 12-7; T2, 12-12; T3, 12-15).

Recommendation: Having clear, common messaging surrounding what "honors" means that all stakeholders—teachers, administrators, students, and families—can articulate can foster a sense of unity in belief and create of a culture where honors-level instruction is done with fidelity. Creating a common and clear definition of "honors" would require district and school leaders to decide what distinguishes an honors class from its standard level counterpart. This may include curricular differences between levels, prerequisite courses needed, pacing differences between levels, and skills needed for success. Policymakers may also need to consider how students are recommended for honors classes to ensure students are not barred from taking classes based on non-academic factors or biases (Bernhardt, 2018; Card & Giuliano, 2016; Lofton, 2019; Modica, 2015).

Implication 3 – Support Personnel and Professional Development

Having ongoing professional development in providing honors-level instruction and having instructional personnel who support teachers is vital for any honors-for-all initiative. This study found that while teaching in an honors-for-all classroom was challenging, teachers did adopt new pedagogical techniques—engagement/workshop model, small group instruction, scaffolds and differentiation, blended learning and project-based learning—through professional development opportunities and ongoing assistance from support personnel. Throughout the interviews and document analysis, the instructional coaches, gifted resource teacher, and new instructional tools and strategies were cited as positively impacting instruction and supporting teachers. Even among teachers who were not in support of honors-for-all, the

support provided by these faculty members was appreciated (D13; DOA, 12-15; P, 12-10; T2, 12-12; T3, 12-15).

Recommendation: In an endeavor that can create a paradigm shift, such as honors-for-all, teachers need ongoing support to adapt to the new changes and meet all their students' learning needs. Investing in professional development opportunities focused on the quality of instruction expected in an honors classroom allows teachers to learn and grow in their pedagogy. Additionally, having support personnel to assist teachers, such as instructional coaches and gifted resource teachers, ensures that strategies and tools learned from professional development trainings are implemented to align and improve instruction school-wide. Providing continuous support to teachers is especially important for school morale and climate given that teaching in an honors-for-all setting can be challenging and not all teachers may be in favor of a detracking initiative.

Implication 4 – Vertical Articulation

Some of the challenges that arose may be mitigated through vertical articulation with elementary feeder schools. This study found that challenges arose in teaching in an honors-for-all classroom, specifically in meeting the wide range of diverse learning needs in the detracked setting and in honors mathematics courses. All of the participants stated that it was challenging to differentiate and scaffold for students across ability levels, such as having some students who read at a lower-elementary level and others who have college-level literacy skills in the same class (DOA, 12-15; IC, 12-7; P, 12-10; T1, 12-7; T2, 12-12; T3, 12-15). In mathematics courses, Teacher 2 (12-12) and the District Office Administrator (12-15) stated it was particularly difficult to teach the whole class in the honors-for-all setting as students had different exposure to previous content. In the honors-for-all mathematics classes, some students

had been on an honors track since elementary school while other students skipped a grade level of mathematics standards when they were placed in Mathematics 7 Honors during the 2022-2023 school year (T2, 12-12). Additionally, the Principal (12-10) explained that not all of Central Middle School's feeder elementary schools offered Mathematics 5 Honors that would have prepared students for Mathematics 6 Honors in middle school.

Recommendation: Middle schools who are considering detracking in an honors-for-all approach should make a concerted effort to collaborate with elementary teachers and administrators to ensure content at the elementary school provides students the skills and background knowledge needed to be successful in an honors middle school class. Although some of the students' needs that made differentiation challenging may be a result of the pandemic, as the impact COVID-19 continues to lessen with each new cohort of students, elementary school instruction that aligns with the middle school's definitions of "honors," "high quality, rigorous instruction," and "high quality academic tasks" (D7; D8) will narrow the gap between students. In addition, having elementary schools offer advanced mathematics classes will assist in preventing content and skill gaps between students and limit the number of students missing an entire grade level of mathematics, which will support students building towards Algebra I in eighth grade.

Recommendations for Future Study

The study reported in this dissertation is a unique, single case at a particular middle school. While the findings have implications and provide lessons learned to other schools and districts considering detracking using an honors-for-all approach, results from this study should be interpreted in conjunction with other research and in context of the setting of the study's site. One recommendation for future study is to track a cohort of students from Central Middle School

and observe their course selections and academic achievement through high school to see if honors-for-all had any effect on their educational outcomes and post-secondary pathways. It would also be eye-opening to interview students about their experiences in honors-for-all and how they feel it has impacted their education.

Another potential research topic is to conduct a similar study at a school that detracked, but eliminated honors-level classes, making all course offerings at the standard-level. In comparing Central Middle School with another middle school that dismantled honors classes, the researcher could examine if the "honors" label has any effect on how teachers feel tracking. Finally, another study could be replicated at Central Middle School years later when the impacts of COVID-19 have lessened and the honors-for-all programming has been more firmly established, presuming it is still in effect. As the District Office Administrator noted, whether honors-for-all was successful and its impact is "still to be seen" (DOA, 12-15).

Conclusion

The findings of this study discovered how teachers' beliefs on tracking and honors-level classes and teachers' pedagogy were impacted after implementation of a detracked, honors-for-all program of studies. Specifically, this study revealed how teaching in a detracked setting affected what teachers believe about tracking and honors and how their instruction changed to ensure all students could be academically successful in advanced classes that were heterogeneously mixed in terms of ability. In a school district where honors-for-all was becoming a trend, middle schools currently lie along a continuum of completely detracked to tracking with open enrollment honors. This research sought to provide an understanding of teachers' perspectives in one of the first middle schools to offer honors-for-all as an increasing number of schools consider detracking.

Analysis of data and findings were guided by the conceptual framework for this study and the literature review. The conceptual framework theorizes that where a school lies on the detracking—tracking continuum can impact teachers' beliefs about tracking and honors which may affect their pedagogy (Bernhardt, 2018; Sørensen, 1970). The themes from the literature review included: (a) race and bias in track placement, (b) teacher quality and pedagogical differences between tracks, (c) student achievement between tracks, and (d) socio-emotional effects of tracking.

Overall the study found that teachers' beliefs about tracking and honors classes did not change after implementation of honors-for-all at Central Middle School. However, teachers did shift their instructional practices to include the engagement/workshop model, small group instruction, scaffolds and differentiation, blended learning, and project-based learning no matter their opinions and beliefs. This change in pedagogy may be the result of teachers' care for their students, rather than honors-for-all itself, and their desire to meet the various learning needs in their classes. Despite teachers' best efforts, challenges did arise, namely in attempting to differentiate instruction, impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the unique curricular differences between tracks in mathematics.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Email to Potential Participants Requesting Interviews

Dear _____,

You are receiving this email as a request for your participation in a study on the honors-for-all programming at Central Middle School in Central School District. This research has been approved by both the Virginia Tech Internal Review Board (IRB) and Central School District.

As a current assistant principal, I am interested in examining how detracking using an honors-for-all approach has impacted teachers' beliefs and pedagogy. This study explores what teachers believe about tracking (having separate honors and standard-level courses) and how instructional practices have been impacted since Central Middle School began its honors-for-all programming. Above all, this study seeks to understand honors-for-all through the perspectives of the teachers and faculty members who work at Central Middle School.

Interviews should take 30-60 minutes. In addition, you may be asked to provide documents and information related to honors-for-all implementation. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and all responses and identifying information will remain confidential. A full explanation of Informed Consent for this study is attached for your review. Please read carefully before deciding to participate.

If you are willing to participate, please complete and send me the Informed Consent form. I will then be in contact to schedule an interview. All interviews will be conducted within the two-week period of November 27 - December 8, 2023.

I greatly appreciate your time, assistance, and perspective on your experiences! If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to reach out to me.

Sincerely,

Hanna Langstein

Virginia Tech, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Ed.D. Candidate

hblangstein@vt.edu

571-205-3645 (cell)

Appendix B

Virginia Tech Consent to Take Part in a Research Study

Title of research study: Honors-for-All: The Effect of Detracking on Teachers' Beliefs and Pedagogy, #23-975

Principal Investigator: Hanna Langstein, 571-205-3645, hblangstein@vt.edu

Key Information: This study is a qualitative case study on Central Middle School's honors-for-all, detracked programming. The study investigates how detracking using an honors-for-all approach has impacted teachers' beliefs and pedagogy. This study explores what teachers believe about tracking (having separate honors and standard-level courses), what "honors" means, and how instructional practices have been impacted since Central Middle School began its honors-for-all programming. This study seeks to understand honors-for-all through the perspectives of the teachers and faculty members who work at Central Middle School. Data will be collected through interviews and document analysis.

Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to the research team at hblangstein@vt.edu.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may communicate with them at 540-231-3732 or irb@vt.edu if:

- You have questions about your rights as a research subject
- 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 to provide feedback about this research

How many people will be studied?

We plan to include about 10-15 people in this research study.

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

- Participate in one interview for 30-60 minutes with Hanna Langstein on Zoom.
- You may be asked to provide documents and additional information regarding honors-for-all implementation, such as grade level content team meeting minutes, master schedule, and curriculum guides.
- Interviews will be conducted during the two-week period of November 27 – December 8, 2023.
- Interviews will be recorded for data analysis purposes. Transcriptions of interviews will be provided to participants for review of accuracy.

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

You can leave the research at any time, for any reason, and it will not be held against you.

If you decide to leave the research, contact the investigator so that the investigator can cancel the interview and delete the interview recording and transcription. If you decide to not be interviewed, but would like to contribute to the research in another way, you can provide documents and information regarding honors-for-all programming at Central Middle School.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

There are no known risks to participating in this study.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

I will make every effort to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information only to people who have a need to review this information. I cannot promise complete confidentiality. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the IRB, Human Research Protection Program, and other authorized representatives of Virginia Tech.

The results of this research study may be presented in summary form at conferences, in presentations, reports to the sponsor, academic papers, and as part of a thesis/dissertation.

Signature Block for Capable Adult

Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research. We will provide you with a signed copy of this form for your records.

Signature of subject	Date
Printed name of subject	
Signature of person obtaining consent	Date
Printed name of person obtaining consent	

Signature Block for Capable Adult – Consent to be Recorded

Your signature documents your permission to be audio and video recorded via Zoom. We will provide you with a signed copy of this form for your records.

Signature of subject	Date
Printed name of subject	
Signature of person obtaining consent	Date
Printed name of person obtaining consent	

Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Teachers

1. Opening: What is your teaching experience?
2. Do you think students should be tracked, meaning honors and standard-level classes should be separate? Why or why not?
3. Have your beliefs about tracking changed since working in an honors-for-all school? If so, how?
4. How are honors courses different from standard-level courses?
5. Have your beliefs about honors classes changed since working in an honors-for-all school? If so, how?
6. Do you think that honors-for-all is appropriate for all students? Why or why not?
7. Have your planning, instruction, and assessment practices changed since working in an honors-for-all school? If so, how?
8. What professional development, if any, did you receive to teach honors-for-all? Are you receiving professional development now to teach honors-for-all?
9. Do you believe detracking (honors-for-all) has impacted students' academic achievement? Why or why not?
10. Do you believe detracking (honors-for-all) has impacted students' socio-emotional well-being? Why or why not?
11. Do you think detracking (honors-for-all) mitigates inequities for students in traditionally underrepresented groups? Why or why not?
12. Closing: Have there been any surprises about honors-for-all? If so, what were they?

Appendix D

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Non-Teaching Faculty

1. Opening: What has been your involvement in implementing the honors-for-all programming?
2. What were the teachers' responses to honors-for-all when it was first announced?
3. Do you think teachers' opinions about honors-for-all have changed since implementation? If so, how?
4. How have the planning, instruction, and assessment practices at Central Middle School changed since honors-for-all began?
5. What professional development did teachers receive to teach honors-for-all? Are teachers currently receiving any professional development to teach honors-for-all?
6. Do you believe detracking (honors-for-all) has impacted students' academic achievement? Why or why not?
7. Do you believe detracking (honors-for-all) has impacted students' socio-emotional well-being? Why or why not?
8. Do you think detracking (honors-for-all) mitigates inequities for students in traditionally underrepresented groups? Why or why not?
9. Closing: Have there been any surprises about honors-for-all? If so, what were they?

Appendix E

Central School District Middle School Course Descriptions for English Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies[5]

Course	Standard-Level Description	Honors-Level Description
English 6	Students read and study a variety of fiction and nonfiction, building on an understanding of reading as a process that includes analyzing and comprehending texts. Language study includes building vocabulary, learning about grammar, and spelling. Through varied and frequent writing assignments, students build on their understanding of writing as a process that includes drafting, revising, editing, proofreading, and publishing. They use writing to develop ideas and learn new concepts. Students also learn discussion skills, research skills, and oral communication skills, and learn to adapt speaking and listening to the audience, topic, purpose, and situation. Reading and writing competencies addressed in the Virginia Standards of Learning are incorporated into the course objective.	As students read and study a variety of fiction and nonfiction, building on an understanding of reading as a process that includes analyzing and interpreting the text, they make connections across time, place, and subject; perform as a practitioner or scholar in a discipline; and self-assess and reflect on their learning and the learning process. Instruction is enriched and extended through research-based practices designed to engage and challenge advanced learners (e.g., problem-based learning, research, and investigations).
English 7	Students read and study a variety of texts, building on an understanding of reading as a process that includes analysis and interpretation. Language study includes building vocabulary, learning about grammar, and spelling. Through	This course extends the standard program of studies for English 7. As students read and study a variety of texts, building on an understanding of reading as a process that includes analyzing and interpreting the text, they make connections

[5] Information retrieved Central School District's public website.

	varied and frequent writing assignments, students build on their understanding of writing as a process that includes drafting, revising, editing, proofreading, and publishing. They use writing to develop ideas and learn new concepts. Students also learn discussion skills, research skills, and oral communication skills, and learn to adapt speaking and listening to the audience, topic, purpose, and situation. Reading and writing competencies addressed in the Virginia Standards of Learning are incorporated into the course objectives.	across time, place, and subject; perform as a practitioner or scholar in a discipline; and self-assess and reflect on their learning and the learning process. Instruction is enriched and extended through research-based practices designed to engage and challenge advanced learners (e.g., problem-based learning, research, and investigations).
English 8	Students read and study a variety of texts, building on an understanding of reading as a process that includes analysis and interpretation. Language study includes building vocabulary, learning about grammar, and spelling. Through varied and frequent writing assignments, students build on their understanding of writing as a process that includes drafting, revising, editing, proofreading, and publishing. Students practice a variety of writing forms including informational/technical and essay writing. All students learn research skills and adapt speaking and writing skills to the audience, topic, purpose, and situation. Reading and writing competencies addressed in the Virginia Standards of Learning are incorporated into the course objectives.	This course extends the standard program of studies for English 8. As students read and study a variety of texts, building on an understanding of reading as a process that includes analyzing and interpreting the text, they make connections across time, place and subject; perform as a practitioner or scholar in a discipline; and self-assess and reflect on their learning and the learning process. Instruction is enriched and extended through research-based practices designed to engage and challenge advanced learners (e.g., problem-based learning, research, and investigations).

Science 6	Students will investigate the grade 6 science standards through four units: Astronomy, Patterns of Weather, H2O, and Energy. Students explore the characteristics of their world, from the Earth's placement in the solar system to the interactions of water, energy, air, and ecosystems on the Earth. As students more closely examine the use of resources, they also consider how their actions and choices affect future habitability on Earth. Students continue to develop scientific skills and processes as they pose questions, plan and conduct investigations, collect and analyze data, construct explanations, and communicate information about the natural world. Mathematics and computational thinking gain importance as students advance in their scientific thinking. Students continue to use the engineering design process to apply their scientific knowledge to solve problems.	Students will investigate the grade 6 science standards through four units: Astronomy, Patterns of Weather, H2O, and Energy. Students explore the characteristics of their world, from the Earth's placement in the solar system to the interactions of water, energy, air, and ecosystems on the Earth. As students more closely examine the use of resources, they also consider how their actions and choices affect future habitability on Earth. Students continue to develop scientific skills and processes as they pose questions, plan and conduct investigations, collect and analyze data, construct explanations, and communicate information about the natural world. Mathematics and computational thinking gain importance as students advance in their scientific thinking. Students continue to use the engineering design process to apply their scientific knowledge to solve problems. Instruction is enriched and extended through practices designed to engage and challenge advanced learners.
Science 7	This course builds upon life sciences skills and understanding introduced to students in the upper-elementary grades. Students explore the cellular organization and the classification of organisms; the dynamic relationships among organisms, populations, communities, and ecosystems; and change as a result of the transmission of genetic information from	This course builds upon life sciences skills and understanding introduced to students in the upper-elementary grades. Students explore the cellular organization and the classification of organisms; the dynamic relationships among organisms, populations, communities, and ecosystems; and change as a result of the transmission of genetic information from

	generation to generation. Science and engineering practices are integrated throughout the course as students carry out investigations, evaluate the usefulness of models, collect and analyze data, and formulate evidence-based conclusions.	generation to generation. Science and engineering practices are integrated throughout the course as students carry out investigations, evaluate the usefulness of models, collect and analyze data, and formulate evidence-based conclusions. At the Honors level, students deepen their understanding and independent application of science research skills.
Science 8	This course builds upon physical science skills and understanding introduced to students in the upper-elementary grades. Major areas covered by the standards include the particle nature of matter; the organization and use of the periodic table; physical and chemical changes; energy transfer and transformations; properties of longitudinal and transverse waves; electricity and magnetism; and work, force, and motion. Science and engineering practices are integrated throughout the course as students carry out investigations, collect and analyze data, and formulate evidence-based conclusions. The end of course test covers content from Grades 6, 7, and 8.	This course builds upon physical science skills and understanding introduced to students in the upper-elementary grades. Major areas covered by the standards include the particle nature of matter; the organization and use of the periodic table; physical and chemical changes; energy transfer and transformations; properties of longitudinal and transverse waves; electricity and magnetism; and work, force, and motion. Science and engineering practices are integrated throughout the course as students carry out investigations, collect and analyze data, and formulate evidence-based conclusions. The end of course test covers content from Grades 6, 7, and 8. At the Honors level, students deepen their understanding and independent application of science research skills.
History and Social Studies 6	This grade six course provides a survey of the political, economic, and social challenges facing the United States until 1865. Students will use historical thinking skills required for geographic analysis, economic decision making, and	This course extends the standard program of studies for US History in Grade 6, a survey of American history until 1865. Students will use historical thinking skills required for geographic analysis, economic decision making, and

	responsible citizenship. Students will learn tools to think conceptually; make connections across time, place and subject areas; and perform as a practitioner or scholar in a discipline.	responsible citizenship. Students will think conceptually; make connections across time, place and subject areas; and perform as a practitioner or scholar in a discipline. Instruction is enriched and extended through research-based practices designed to engage and challenge advanced learners with problem-based learning, research, and investigations.
History and Social Studies 7	The grade seven course provides a survey of the political, economic, and social challenges facing the United States from the Reconstruction Era to present day. Students will explore the complex relationships within the United States and with the global community. Students will use historical thinking skills required for geographic analysis, economic decision making, and responsible citizenship. Students will think conceptually; make connections across time, place and subject areas; and perform as a practitioner or scholar in a discipline.	This course extends the standard program of studies for US History in grade 7, a survey of American history since 1865. Students will explore the complex relationships within the United States and with the global community. Students will think conceptually; make connections across time, place and subject areas; and perform as a practitioner or scholar in a discipline. Students enrolled in the Honors course will have learning opportunities that enhance independent work habits.
History and Social Studies 8	The grade eight program is designed to prepare students to be responsible, productive citizens in a democratic republic and an interconnected world. Students will gain an understanding of the concepts and processes of democratic government and the American economic system. Students examine the role that citizens play in the political, governmental, and economic systems in the United States. Students	This course extends the standard program of studies for Honors Civics and Economics in grade 8 which is designed to prepare students to be responsible, productive citizens in a democratic republic and an interconnected world. As they gain an understanding of the concepts and processes of democratic government and the American economic system the students will think conceptually; make connections across

	will acquire knowledge of the structure and operation of these systems at the national, state and local levels. As they gain an understanding of the concepts and processes of democratic government and the American economic system the students will think conceptually; make connections across time, place and subject areas; perform as a practitioner or scholar in a discipline; and self-assess and reflect on their learning and the learning process.	time, place and subject areas; perform as a practitioner or scholar in a discipline; and self-assess and reflect on their learning and the learning process. Students enrolled in the Honors course will have learning opportunities that enhance independent work habits.