

PEDAGOGICAL DECISION-MAKING IN TRACKED CLASSES: A SINGLE-CASE STUDY

by

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(Under the Direction of Margaret Wilder)

ABSTRACT

Public education in America has relied on testing students to ascertain their level of abilities; thus sorting them into academic categories referred to as *tracking* (Glaser & Silver, 1994). Students are then placed in these different educational tracks, which carry with them significant variations in instructional quality and teachers' perceptions (Callahan, 2005; Gamoran, 2004; Gamoran & Nystrand, 1994; Oakes, 2005). The purpose of this study was to examine how a mathematics teacher's perceptions of her tracked students informed her pedagogical decision-making. This study explored how tracking affected a teacher's decisions and if the teacher acted against the structures of tracking, known as *agency*. To achieve this goal, the researcher designed a qualitative case study with three research questions: How does a teacher's perceptions of groups of students she teaches compare to each other based on track level? What does teaching look like in tracked classes? Where does a teacher's perception of her class intersect with the strategies employed? By using a single participant, the study focused on providing a "thick" description of the participant, given her unique experiences and interactions, as well as how her perceptions influenced her pedagogical decisions.

The eleven-week study was conducted in a sixth-grade mathematics teacher's room in a school in the southeastern United States. The theoretical framework used to guide this study was

symbolic interactionism, which allowed for a focus on the interactions and their meanings. For data collection, the researcher employed semi-structured interview, audio/video recorded observations, field notes, and video-cued interviews. The semi-structured interview inquired about the background and philosophical beliefs of the participant in regards to tracking. The observations and field notes offered the researcher critical incidents to compare between the classes and context. The video-cued interviews provided the opportunity for the participant to view and reflect on these instances in her practice and give the researcher a more in-depth explanation of her decision-making. The findings of this study suggest that the gifted and lower-tracked students were placed in a constant state of comparison, with the gifted students being given a more favorable characterization.

INDEX WORDS: Tracking, Symbolic Interactionism, Case Study, Video-Cued Interview, Agency, Pedagogical Decision-Making

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the love of my life, Ashlee and our three wonderful children:
Autumn, Jonah, and Julian.

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To my family— Thank you for the love and support in everything that you do! I am grateful to be so blessed.

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Psalm 7:17 “I will give thanks to the Lord because of his righteousness; I will sing the praises of the name of the Lord Most High” (NIV).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
LIST OF FIGURES	ix
CHAPTER	
1 Introduction.....	1
The History of the Problem.....	3
Defining the Tracking System	6
Significance of Study	8
Purpose of the Study	10
Research Questions.....	11
Theoretical Framework.....	11
Overview of the Research Procedures	15
Organization of the Dissertation	16
2 Review of Literature	17
Teachers’ Perceptions of Their Students as a Determinant of How Classes and Students Are Taught	17
Literature Regarding Teachers’ Perceptions.....	24
Gaps in the Literature.....	41
Chapter Summary	43
3 Methodology and Methods	44

Methodology	44
Methods.....	49
Data Analysis	65
Chapter Summary	69
4 Presentation of Findings	70
Mrs. Cleaver.....	71
Emerged Themes	73
Chapter Summary	104
5 Discussion and Implications	106
Summary of the Themes	107
Symbolic Interactionism	119
Summary.....	124
Limitations	130
Implications.....	132
Concluding Thoughts.....	134
REFERENCES	137
APPENDICES	
A Informational Letter for Potential Participants	148
B Consent Form.....	150
C Introductory Interview Guide	152
D Video-Cued Interview Guide.....	157

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1: Track Levels at Hope Middle School.....	8
Figure 2: Description of the Classes by Gender and Race.....	56
Figure 3: Timeline of Classroom Observations and Interviews	58

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the last century, the idea of testing students' intellectual abilities to sort them academically became more pervasive throughout the American educational system and is now broadly referred to as tracking (Glaser & Silver, 1994). Tracking is the process of sorting students based on their perceived ability level; in public schools, it is a pervasive practice that occurs throughout the country. According to Oakes (2005), tracking is “the process whereby students are divided into categories so that they can be assigned in groups to various kinds of classes” (p. 3). Oakes (2005) also highlighted conditions under which tracking typically functions, which are situations where both students and groups are identified openly and receive differing curricula.

According to research, formal tracking can be an inequitable school practice in itself—creating separate spaces for students that privilege the higher tracked over the general education tracked students (Ansalone, 2001; Gamoran, 2009; Riordan, 2004). Throughout the years, there have been numerous accounts of the ways in which tracking stratifies students (Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Hoffer, 1992; Pallas, Entwisle, Alexander, & Stulka, 1994; Useem, 1992). Specifically, recent research showed that variations in both instructional quality (Caughlan & Kelly, 2004) and emotional support were evident based on track level (Donaldson, LeChasseur, & Meyer, 2016). In Caughlan and Kelly (2004), the lower-track students were given work that focused on rote memorization and basic level knowledge while their higher-tracked peers were given more rigorous work and spent more time in discussion of the material. In Donaldson et al.

(2016), the lower-track teacher threatened punitive measures and used sarcasm when confronted with off-task behavior, while neither was used in the higher-tracked classes. Teachers were expected to provide the best instruction possible while also supporting the emotional needs of students to create the best environment conducive to learning.

Although tracking is both present and practiced in American schools, there has been at least some positive development in certain areas of the country. There has been a decline in the amount of tracked classes over the past few decades. This is due, at least in part, to the anti-tracking movement, which is supported by research literature and has influenced the decisions of some local school boards (Loveless, 2016). Nevertheless, the decline in tracked classes is not across all disciplines. Tracking continues to be present typically in middle grades (Mulkey, Catsambis, Steelman, & Crain, 2005), despite the decades of research exposing the negative effects (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Gamoran, 2009; Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Oakes, 2005). When examined by discipline, Loveless (2013) found that mathematics continued to be the most highly tracked subject matter in the early twenty-first century. In a school system where students are separated by a perceived intellectual aptitude, mathematics classes hold a unique place in the tracking system. Lerman (2000) claimed “mathematics [is] seen as a marker of general intellectual capacity” and perhaps math classes are tracked due to the acceptance of the belief that links mathematical ability to an intellectual capacity (p. 24). As a result, many students continue to experience the inequitable school practices associated with tracking (Ansalone, 2001; Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Hoffer, 1992).

The History of the Problem

Schooling became compulsory in many areas of the United States during the Progressive period between the 1890s to 1920s (Tyack, 1976). This requirement was possibly a reactionary measure meant to serve the older workers often displaced by both their younger counterparts and immigrants. The Progressive period was stained by eugenics, a classist and racist movement under the guise of science that attempted to prove racial superiority of whites. However, the number of immigrants and African-Americans in the country began to rise during this time, and the role of schooling began to shift as well.

Throughout much of the nineteenth century, schools were primarily used as a stepping stone for those who were preparing for college. The focus of such preparation was in the classics and arithmetic (Perlmann, 1985). Nevertheless, schooling was expanded and enrollment tripled during the turn of the twentieth century (Rudolph, 2005), which gave rise to the question of what to do with the students. Based on the ideas of the eugenics movement, immigrants, African-Americans, and poor students were not deemed intellectually capable or worthy of preparation for college, and, therefore, needed another path.

Eugenics was a pseudo-scientific movement based on the ideas of Sir Francis Galton. Dorr (2000) claimed that the purpose of eugenics was to “improve hereditary qualities, and specifically, human racial purity” (p. 258). In America, the focus of the eugenics movement was largely based on race. It was a way to legitimate the racial hierarchy, in which white males were at the pinnacle. Eugenics influenced Jim Crow laws in the South and legitimated the low status of African-Americans, who were viewed as less evolved than whites. It also provided many with what was considered a scientific reasoning for racist beliefs.

Although it is also important to highlight that while race was the primary topic in American eugenicist thought, many also believed that eugenics could explain class status of individuals. Dorr (2000) explained that working-class whites were viewed as “genetic defectives in need of controls” and low IQ scores could be attributed to the notion that “intelligence tests...measure[d] underlying genetic worth” (p. 260). The lower the score on the IQ test, the less worthy a person was to receive college preparation. The effects of these tests stretched beyond the reaches of education. Intelligence was something believed to be hereditary, and thus certain measures could be ascertained to ensure racial purity and intellectual growth. Dorr (2000) stated that such measures included but are not limited to forced sterilization, “immigration restrictions, institutional segregation, and bans on interracial marriage” (p. 260). The idea was that IQ tests provided the scientific proof needed to show who was undesirable, who was unworthy of having children, or who was unable to live freely in American society.

The Progressive period was also marked by an obsession with social efficiency and using the latest scientific means to solve social problems (Knoll, 2009). Restructuring how schools operated to meet the needs of both society and the economy was viewed by many as a socially efficient approach to education (Labaree, 2005). One of the men leading the charge was Lewis Terman, a Stanford professor who modified and translated the Binet test of intelligence. Terman rose to prominence in World War I, when he was hired by the United States Army to develop tests to assess soldiers’ intellectual capabilities (Ackerman, 1995; Haney, 1981; Spring, 1972). Terman developed two tests; the Alpha test was administered to the literate soldiers and the Beta test to the illiterate. The army referred to the commanding officers of the soldiers to corroborate the results. Because the commanding officers were in general agreement with the results of the

tests—with a rather high correlation—the tests were deemed valid in judging aptitude to become a good soldier (Spring, 1972).

Once the war was over, the Alpha and Beta tests were introduced in schools. Spring (1972) noted, “after the armistice was signed, the government flooded the market with unused Alpha and Beta test booklets that were immediately utilized by psychologists and educators” due to their low cost (p. 4). However, alternatives to the Alpha and Beta tests became readily available throughout the 1920s and eventually overtook the market as the older Alpha and Beta tests became scarce. Many of these alternative tests were created by the same group of psychologists who had worked for the Army during World War I and their protégés.

Binet claimed the Alpha and Beta tests measured something he called *native intelligence*, which Spring (1972) roughly defined as the ability to function in a highly complex society. Given the historical context, it is not surprising that these tests reinforced what many of the psychologists of the time had already claimed—upper-class white students typically had a higher IQ than their counterparts who were immigrants, minorities, or poor—when in fact they were more knowledgeable of complex society. For this reason, the IQ test received criticism early on for being biased based on race and class. Ackerman (1995) claimed that many historians critique intelligence testing and many of them have come to the same conclusion, which is that:

School systems quickly adopted intelligence testing in the 1920s in order to facilitate the establishment of tracking systems, and how the elitist, racist, and hereditarian beliefs of the founders of the testing profession...provided legitimacy to the under representation of immigrants, blacks and the poor in the upper tracks. (p. 279)

Terman (1916) wanted to use intelligence tests as an “instrument for determining vocational fitness” and to identify “the vocational significance of any given degree of mental

inferiority or superiority” (p. 15). With this in mind, his eventual goal for the intelligence test was to introduce manual training in schools (Chapman, 1981). Manual training provided a more practical education for those whom he believed to be mentally inferior. In other words, manual training was designed for students who were mentally unfit to attend college (Perlmann, 1985). While the idea of assigning students varying classes based on testing has evolved over the last century, it is still widely practiced throughout the country in the form of tracking.

Defining the Tracking System

At the core of the tracking system is a stratified classification of students based on some form of intelligence testing. Researchers have shown over the last four decades how tracking has influenced differential experiences for students based on their track level (Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Jencks, 1972). Many of these experiences are with the highest track receiving more opportunities than other tracks (Hoffer, 1992; Pallas et al., 1994; Riordan, 2004). However, throughout the country, the tracking system is not uniform or uniformly applied. Students are tested differently and the methods of sorting them varies depending on the schools. For example, there are schools that track students within a class and sort them based on ability by topic. On the other hand, many schools structure a more rigid system in which students are separated into different classes based on their test scores. Despite these differences in how tracking is enacted, they both fall under the umbrella term tracking.

Biafora and Ansalone (2008) categorized tracking into two broad types of sorting students: informal and formal. Informal tracking refers to creating homogenous groups of students within a classroom by the teacher (Ansalone, 2009). Informal tracking is grouping based primarily on assessments over a specific topic, such as a quiz, and the groupings are

subject to change within the classroom. For example, a student may be placed in a lower group for one task, but then moved to a different group for a subsequent task that the student is more proficient at accomplishing based on the completion of similar tasks. This method of tracking does not change any future class placement of a student; rather, it is used as a classroom management tool to group students. Formal tracking is used to define grouping practices at the district level based primarily on standardized test scores to determine an ability level and subsequent gifted testing if it is warranted. At the school level, formal tracking sorts students into different classes all together to create intellectually homogenous classes of students.

Where this study was conducted, Hope Middle School (pseudonym), the students are sorted into three primary tracks, as shown in Figure 1. According to Oakes (2005), gifted students are considered to be of the highest intellectual ability and are given the most rigorous work. The gifted classes are also separated from the other students and have smaller class sizes. Next, are the general education students, whose scores are within the “normal” ranges on standardized tests and make up the largest group of students in the school. General education students are not given the same opportunities that are given to gifted students, and they are not perceived by their teachers in the same manner (Ansalone, 2009; Riordan, 2004; Rubie-Davies, Hattie, Townsend, & Hamilton, 2004). Finally, are the special education students, who have an identified disability that impedes their education and are given specialized services to account for their disability.


Gifted	The gifted classes consist of students who have qualified for gifted services by means of high standardized test scores and high scores on gifted testing.	High Perceived Ability
General Education	This group of students makes up the largest group in each grade level. These students do not receive any special services and scored within the normal ranges of the standardized tests.	
Special Education	These students receive special services based on an identified disability from a medical professional. Students in this category are either included in general education classes with a support teacher or are in smaller classes exclusively with other special education students if their disability is great.	

Figure 1. Track Levels at Hope Middle School

Significance of Study

There is very little research in the field of tracking that emphasizes how individual teachers' perceptions shape pedagogical practices. Nevertheless, there is a considerable body of research that focused on how tracking fosters variations in instructional quality (Callahan, 2005; Gamoran, 2004; Gamoran & Nystrand, 1994; Oakes, 2005). There is also research that illustrated the link between tracking and occupational location (Moller & Stearns, 2012). Also, there is research in tracking that highlighted the racial and socio-economic segregation that occurs through the sorting of students (Ansalone, 2000; Bonner, 2000; Hallinan, 1995; Nunn, 2011). While these are relevant ways in which tracking continues to affect students throughout the country, there is one commonly overlooked topic in tracking research that involves personal intervention, which is commonly called "agency."

Agency means that a person is enacting their ability to disrupt or work against existing structures (Giroux, 1983). More specifically, Musolf (2003) defines agency as something that "emerges through the ability of humans to ascribe meaning to objects and events, to define the situation based on those meanings, and then to act" (p. 8). Based on this definition, there are a few things that must occur for the person to enact agency. First, the person must recognize the

paradigm that they are working within and make sense of how the situation is organized or structured. Next, the person must undergo some form of cognitive dissonance, where he or she concludes that the structure is either inequitable or could be made better by changing his or her interactions within the structure. Lastly, he or she must consciously make a choice to act against the status quo of how the structure functions. It is this definition of agency that will be used in this study.

The anti-tracking movement may have influenced the decline in the tracking system; however, it is also possible that individual teachers within the tracking system are working against it. Within the classroom, a teacher holds the possibility of counteracting larger structures in education that may not be in the best interest of students' progress; thus, counteracting those structures allows her to create a positive learning environment.

Two goals of this study include the following:

- 1) to better understand what a teacher's perceptions of her tracked students look like in practice; and
- 2) to examine how a teacher's perceptions influence pedagogical decisions, i.e., how he or she will teach the class or what materials he or she will use.

No research was found which sought out to accomplish these goals. Moreover, no research was found that examined a middle grades mathematics teacher and the explanation on the decision-making process on how he or she teaches tracked classes. Middle school is an important time in a child's life and the classes that they take at this age are consequential (Wang & Goldschmidt, 2003). Also, tracking in mathematics classes offers a unique opportunity as research shows that the greatest effects of tracking occur in this subject (Gamoran, 1987) and that success in a mathematics class is closely tied to the students' experiences (Lee, Croninger, & Smith, 1997).

Additionally, considering that tracking typically begins in middle grades (Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011) and occurs most often in mathematics classrooms, it is important to study what happens in these classrooms. This study begins to address these gaps and provides an opportunity to examine teacher agency in tracked classes.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how a mathematics teacher's perceptions of her tracked students informs her pedagogical decision-making. By allowing the subject to take an active role in reflecting on her practice in the process, this study gains an insight into her decision-making strategies and provides a greater depth than can be obtained from observations alone.

This study was a case study that was conducted with a single participant: a sixth grade mathematics teacher, referred to in the study as Mrs. Cleaver (pseudonym). Data collection took place in a middle school in Northern Georgia and began in February 2016 and ended in April 2016. The study used the definition and conditions for tracking proposed by Oakes (2005), as it provides a broad but accurate description. Mrs. Cleaver was observed in two of her classes: one of the classes was classified as a gifted class, and the other was a general education class. The classes were observed twice a week, every other week, for a total of twenty classroom observations.

Research Questions

The following research questions are addressed within the study:

- RQ₁: How does a teacher's perceptions of groups of students she teaches compare to each other based on track level?
- RQ₂: What does teaching look like in tracked classes?
- RQ₃: Where does a teacher's perception of her class intersect with the strategies employed?

Theoretical Framework

At the core of this study are the social interactions that occur between the teacher (Mrs. Cleaver) and her students. These interactions are informed by her perceptions of the groups of students. Her interactions with the students have both consequence and meaning. The consequences of interactions affect both curricular decision and classroom management. One of the reasons I chose symbolic interactionism as the theoretical framework for this study is the focus applied on the importance of these interactions and their meanings. Denzin (1992) asserted that interactionist research studies the "intersections of interaction, biography, and social structure in particular moments" placing emphasis on the interactions, context of the participant, and the social structure observed (p. 20).

While the observed interactions and participant are both important to this study, the social structure of tracking must be understood to make sense of the participant's interactions within the structure. Although I examine more of the literature in Chapter Two, the previously reviewed literature has laid the foundation of understanding for the social structure of tracking and introduced some inequities that exist within tracked classrooms. However, what is important

about symbolic interactionism is the opportunity it provides to study an individual teacher and how she interacts with her students without the assumption that she too will propagate inequities. It is a framework that values the meanings of an individual with a given object to make sense of her interactions within the structure. Symbolic interactionism, a constructivist sociological theory, is largely based on the work of American sociologist George Herbert Mead and posits that interactions between people and objects are based upon symbolic meanings that the individual ascribes to the object (Lauer & Handel, 1977). These meanings are influenced by society, but can change with time as those within the society interact with them (Blumer, Lyman, & Vidich, 2000). Hewitt (2003) specified that the premise of symbolic interactionism rests on the belief that “human beings employ symbols, carve out and act toward objects rather than merely respond to stimuli, and act on the basis of interpreted and not only fixed meanings” (p. 307). In other words, while the pertinent literature is important in situating tracking as a structure that has a well-documented history of domination, the participant in this study can choose to act differently.

Symbolic interactionism affords the opportunity to make sense of the social interactions occurring in the classroom. One of the research questions examines how a teacher’s perception of groups of students compare to each other based on track level. The participant’s perspective is of the utmost importance and placed at the forefront of this study in an effort to depict her perceptions accurately. To obtain this data, I chose symbolic interactionism as my framework because there is an inherent commitment to taking the perspective of the participant seriously (Psathas, 1973). Denzin (1978) emphasizes this point when stating that “symbolic interactionism directs the investigator to take, to the best of his ability, the standpoint of those studied” (p. 99).

My commitment to my participant's perspective can be found in both my framework and my methodological choices.

Symbolic interactionism is rooted in three basic ideas (Blumer, 1969; Crotty, 1998; Prasad, 2005). First is the idea that an individual interacts with others and with objects based on the meaning they assign to the objects. In the case of this study, I examine the interactions a teacher has with her students based on the track level of the student. Second, symbolic interactionism addresses the notion that meanings are assigned to objects based on society as a whole. Tracking is a concept that this subject understands based on how society assigns meaning to both the tracking system as a whole and the individual track levels. Her perceptions of the individual track levels may be a subset of how she views the tracking system as a whole, or it may hold a different connotation based, at least partially, on societal views. Finally, symbolic interactionism also affords for individual interpretation based on personal experiences. My subject is not completely static in how she interacts with these students based on societal interpretation of tracking. She holds the possibility to change her interpretations over time based on her classroom experiences with students in different track levels. Coming out of these last two ideas are the concepts of structure and agency, which provide a way to understand how the subject's perceptions of her students inform her pedagogical decision-making based on track level.

Structure, as it is used in this study, refers to what Sewell (1992) explained as a powerful "device, identifying some part of a complex social reality as explaining the whole" (p. 2). Structures act as sets of rules or guidelines for a social reality working to maintain the status quo. The structure that is of importance to this study is tracking and schooling. The societal interpretation of tracking assigns meaning to how teachers interpret their students' ability level.

This interpretation then enforces and strengthens the structure of tracking in public schools. Nevertheless, the structure of tracking only influences how the teachers interact with tracked students and does not determine whether they will be treated any differently within the classroom.

Cooley (1964) asserted that even if an individual is socialized in a certain manner, they have freedom to act on how they will choose to conduct themselves. By enacting agency, an individual consciously chooses to work against structures such as tracking. Prasad (2005) also reminds us that individuals are influenced but not predetermined by meanings that society creates. Individuals make meanings based on their experiences and there is a possibility that an individual's experiences will serve as a catalyst to work contrary to how society assigns meaning to an object. For this study, the idea of agency represents possibilities for the subject to work against the structure of tracking and the conditions embedded in how tracking functions.

The methodological choices help to clarify when and how the teacher is enacting agency in her classroom. Guiding these methodological choices is Crotty's (1998) claim that "only through dialogue can one become aware of the perceptions, feelings, and attitudes of others and interpret their meanings and intent" (pp.75-76). This study began with an interview that followed Crotty's claim in that it started with open dialogue about the experiences and perspectives of the participant based on a focused set of topics related to the study. This interview helped to determine the understanding that the participant is a teacher, a previous student, and a member of the faculty at the school in which she teaches. The interview was continued in video-cued interviews as well, in which her perspective was sought on incidents I observed and recorded from my observations. The discussions of these incidents are crucial to the data because it gives the participant a chance to explain her pedagogical decisions as opposed

to solely inserting my interpretation of the events. Such questioning allows this study to uncover the intent regarding her pedagogical decisions.

Overview of the Research Procedures

To summarize the research procedures, which are further described in Chapter Three, an eleven-week qualitative case study of a single participant was conducted. Hays (2004) described a case study as a methodological choice “seek[ing] to answer focused questions by producing in-depth descriptions and interpretations over a relatively short period of time . . . for purposes of illumination and understanding” (p. 218). The intent of this study was to examine one teacher, in-depth, over the course of eleven weeks. Within the given time, the goal was to highlight how her perceptions of tracked students affected curricular decisions and classroom management. Case study thus provided an appropriate methodology for this study.

Multiple forms of data were collected in the study. A semi-structured interview was first employed to learn about the subject and her rationale for teaching. This interview also served to get the subject more comfortable with the process before she reflected on her practice in subsequent interviews. Next, observations began in two of her classes, one of which was gifted, and the other was not. Following each set of observations, video clips were selected to prompt follow-up interviews. These video-cued interviews were based on the critical incident theory, which served to evaluate specific behaviors observed in the video footage. The video clips displayed differences in the pedagogical decisions between the classes based on the track level. Specifically, this includes differences in instructions, support given, the products expected, or classroom management styles. The observation and interview process was repeated for a total of five cycles.

Organization of the Dissertation

This study consists of five chapters. Chapter One of the study includes the purpose of the study, research questions, significance of the study, theoretical framework, and overview of procedures. Chapter Two is comprised of the related literature on the topic of teacher perceptions. Chapter Three details the methodology and methods of the study. Chapter Four provides the data analysis and findings from the study. Chapter Five offers a summary, discussion, and implications based on the findings of this study.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Understanding the students in the classroom an important part of teaching is. Teachers use any information they have available about students to form opinions that they use in an attempt to understand them. In an attempt to create a better understanding of teaching mathematics, Ernest (1989) claimed that a teacher's knowledge of the students in the classroom was one of the "most powerful determinants of the classroom approach employed by the teacher" (p. 20). The following chapter covers research spanning back nearly fifty years to demonstrate how teachers facilitated inequality from what they perceived to be knowledge of their students' abilities.

Teachers' Perceptions of Their Students as a Determinant of How Classes and Students Are Taught

Aside from kindergarten or preschool-aged children, students seldom come to a new teacher without information the teacher can use to form an opinion about them before the students ever step foot into their class. Students come attached with test scores, permanent records, and the inevitable opinions previous teachers share with their colleagues about their prior students. Their opinions are formed based on many factors such as how students behave, perform on tests, complete classwork, dress, and speak. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) examined the topic of teacher perceptions in relation to intellectual acquisition of elementary school-aged students in their groundbreaking work *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher*

Expectation and Pupils' Intellectual Development. The two-year study examined a working-class elementary school with a diverse student population. The students in the school were separated by both aged-based grade level, and then further sorted into three ability-based groups mainly determined by teacher recommendations. Once sorted, the diversity in the school seemed less apparent depending on the class. The students in the highest-ability group were more likely to be white or middle-class, and students in the lowest-ability group were more likely to be Hispanic or working-class. Based on their observations, Rosenthal and Jacobson claimed that each group exhibited large variations in ability level and were seemingly sorted by race.

The researchers examined what happened when teachers assigned high expectations to specific students based on test scores. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) gave the students a test and explained it to teachers as an intellectual growth predictor. After the initial test was administered, twenty-percent of the students were randomly chosen and considered the highest scorers. The names of higher scoring students were given to their respective teachers. Students across all three groups were included in the experimental twenty-percent. In order to continually track the growth of the students, the test was administered multiple times over the course of the two-year study. The teachers evaluated their students, and the results of these evaluations were shared with the researchers throughout the study. Evaluations of students who were in the highest-ability experimental group were viewed more favorably than their peers in the control group. Students within the lowest-ability experimental group were considered “more autonomous but less affectionate” (p. 117). Students in the highest-ability control group and the lowest-ability experimental group were both evaluated similarly. The authors suggested ability group status and perceptions, respectively, played a role in the evaluations of these two groups. Perhaps most interestingly, children in the lowest-ability control group, who saw the largest

gains in IQ, were viewed more unfavorably by their teachers. The authors attributed these unfavorable ratings to the students' ability group and status in the control group.

Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) study researched the relationship between teacher perceptions and the how favorably they viewed students who they believed to be on the cusp of intellectual gains. Their findings suggested a link between the experimental group and the favorability ratings among their teachers. The mere idea that a student had either a high- or low-ability level affected how they were perceived by their teachers. Furthermore, the authors found that favorability increased the most in the experimental group of students who were in the highest-ability group prior to the study. Ability level may have attributed for the correlation. The authors laid the foundation for research of teacher perceptions, and the results have since been replicated in many studies (Ansalone, 2010; Wilcox, 2015; Worthy, 2010).

Soon after, Rist (1970) conducted a study that examined both teacher perceptions and social interactions to make sense of how social organization formed in a classroom. The study expanded on the work of researchers who, like Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), found a link between teacher perception and student performance. Rist (1970) studied one kindergarten class and followed the students in their first three years of schooling to see how initial teacher perception affected the students' experiences in school. The author's study differed from Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) in the sense that it took place in a school where 98 percent of the student population and all the faculty and staff were African-American. This is important to note as race was not considered a factor for how the students were sorted. Also, over half of the students received public assistance. The author observed the students in the selected class for an hour and a half, two times a week for their kindergarten year in 1967, and again in 1969 when the students were in second grade. The students were also observed, although not as often,

during their first grade year. The teachers where Rist (1970) conducted his research created a lower status for students based on the teachers' "subjectively interpreted attributes and characteristics of the student" (p. 413). In this school, ability grouping generally was employed in ways similar to the school used in Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) study. However, the method of sorting the students in Rist's (1970) study was notably different as the students were grouped within the same classroom as opposed to being grouped into different classes altogether. The teachers were able to stratify the students within their classroom once the teacher identified the students as either intellectually capable or lacking sufficient intellect. Social class was found to be the primary determinant for how the teacher grouped the students, a phenomenon documented in other research (Oakes, 1985; Oakes, 1990).

Working-class students suffer a stigmatization when teachers base their perceptions for the students on social status. The students considered to be of a lower social class were labeled as slow learners. Being treated as a slow learner, Rist insisted, was an even greater tragedy than being a slow learner because the children lose many opportunities to learn. The teachers' assumptions regarding their students were based on a false knowledge that impeded the learning of those in the classroom. Rist (1970) argued that the teachers' perceptions of their students created a self-fulfilling prophesy that manifested through how the classroom operated and what was taught.

Self-fulfilling prophesies do not only occur on the micro-level within classrooms. Bowles and Gintis' (1976) seminal work on the American schooling system examined how the US economic system affected education and created a large-scale self-fulfilling prophesy. While the two previously mentioned works observed primary schools, Bowles and Gintis (1976) spent time in high schools and critiqued the links between schooling and adult life, primarily through a

Marxist economic lens. Also, both previously examined studies linked assumptions that teachers make about their students with how they perceive them based on test scores and socio-economic class; however, neither study examined what happens once the students reached the end of high school. One argument put forth by Bowles and Gintis (1976) was that capitalism caused American people to assign an economic worth to education and adjust the quality of education according to who was deemed worthy of the expense. Within such a system, students were commodities whose worth as a worker was partially determined by the education they received. The individual worth of a worker was also determined in part by the economic idea of scarcity, or specifically in reference to education, the number of people able to complete the task. Bowles and Gintis (1976) provided the example of “the education system,” which “serves to produce surpluses of skilled labor, thereby increasing the power of employers over workers” (p. 114). According to Bowles and Gintis, education reproduced inequalities already in place in society by attributing failure to the individual and providing power to the employers through surpluses of labor. In other words, students in lower tracks were made to feel that they belonged in the track level in which they were placed. Bowles and Gintis (1976) believed the American educational system was structured purposely to create experiences similar to those in the labor force. Broadly, the students acted as the workers and focused on the tasks assigned to them, while following the rules given to them by their teachers. Interestingly, the authors found lower-track students, many of whom were likely to fill unskilled labor positions in the work force, focused more on routines and were under closer supervision when compared to their higher-tracked peers. The authors’ concerns over equity in the American educational system were also based on their findings that race, class, and ethnicity helped to determine what made up the students’ track level in high school and, inevitably, the students’ career track.

According to Bowles and Gintis (1976), perhaps one of the more dangerous features of the educational system was how it “legitimizes economic inequality by providing an open, objective, and ostensibly meritocratic mechanism for assigning individuals to unequal economic positions” (p. 103). Even today, American students are assigned to a placement in the formal track model of education and their placement is continuously reinforced through the grading system and standardized tests. Students internalize and justify the track they belong to after many years of being a part of the tracking system.

Following the groundbreaking work of Bowles and Gintis (1976), Anyon’s (1981) study of five economically divergent elementary schools further studied the relationships between the socio-economic status of those enrolled and what, as well as how, they were taught. The schools were specifically chosen to embody different economic situations, represented by the researcher as working-class, middle-class, affluent professional, and executive elite. Over the course of one school year, Anyon interviewed students, teachers, principals, and district administrators in each of the schools and primarily conducted interviews at the second and fifth grade level. The link between the socio-economic background of the students and what they were taught in class played a prominent role in Anyon’s (1981) study as it did in prior research (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Rist, 1970). Although her study drew a contrast from the previously mentioned works because she studied school level differences and not individual classrooms or track levels, Anyon’s findings are still relevant regarding how teachers use their knowledge of who they teach to help determine how their classrooms function. Specifically, Anyon (1981) found that working-class schools concentrated more on control over the students and routine rather than the curriculum. The curriculum was structured in a way that did not require higher-order thinking and rewarded students for following rote procedures to produce correct answers. Middle-class

schools differed from the working-class schools because they taught that knowledge was capital that could be used to obtain college entrance. Much of what was taught in the middle-class schools were transformed into facts and trivia to amass as much capital as possible. Although an emphasis on correct answers was shared in both working-class and middle-class schools, underlying assumptions about why students should care about these answers differed. In both sets of schools, creative thinking, self-discovery, and the history of the working-class people were all still absent from the classrooms. In contrast to other schools, the affluent professional schools were taught the history of the wealthy, which helped to justify their economic standing. The school also focused more on “personal ‘meaning making’ and the ‘construction of reality’” to further critical thinking skills (p.35). The executive elite school varied from all of the other schools observed in a remarkable way. This school taught the history of the wealthy like some of the other schools but also included contemporary societal issues. The teaching of contemporary issues alongside the curriculum provided the students at the executive elite school with capital that their peers at other schools did not have at their schools. However, it was quite possible that one of the reasons behind teaching the executive elite group about societal issues was due to the more passive effect it would have on this group. These students were deemed less likely to be upset by many of the issues because it did not affect them personally.

Although Anyon’s (1981) study did not specifically reference tracking, it speaks volumes about teachers’ perceptions of their students. The curriculum taught and the rationale for how teachers conducted their classes were linked to the socio-economic status of the students they taught. Their perceptions of what the students needed to know based on their socio-economic status had a direct effect on what the children learned, privileging some students over others.

The early literature regarding teachers' perceptions of their students illustrated how inequities were propagated through classroom practices. The teachers in the studies often allowed their prejudices to shape the social organization of the classroom, which in turn put some students at an educational advantage over others. Up to this point, the literature focused on race and socio-economic status as factors that influenced teachers' perceptions. These perceptions then informed track placement or grouping and, ultimately, what and how the students were taught.

Literature Regarding Teachers' Perceptions

Partially due to the previously mentioned research, subsequent literature concerning teachers' perceptions of their students gained steam by the early 1980s. However, the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* from The National Commission on Excellence in Education brought educational issues to the forefront of popular media. It also shifted the focus of educational research. The report, which was a response to fears that the American educational system lagged in international comparisons, was viewed as a call to arms to fix a broken system. One of the major recommendations of the report concerned stratification in high schools. The commission suggested less of a focus on aged-based grade levels and restructuring schools primarily through academic ability by tracking students early in their academic careers. The idea behind these recommendations was to individualize learning to meet the needs of each student. As these recommendations became policy, the result was a more rigid tracking system that began before high school (Hallinan, 2004). With these changes in the tracking system came changes in academic literature as well. Specifically, research regarding teachers' perceptions of their students became tied more closely to the tracking system.

Teachers' Perceptions of Classes as a Determinant of How Classes are Taught

Tracking sorts students into groups and creates an academic hierarchy in classrooms. Once grouped, Oakes (1985) claimed that tracked students “are characterized by teachers and others as being of a certain type—high ability, low achieving, slow, average, and so on” (p. 3). I define teachers' perceptions of their students' ability level in a similar manner, as the functional set of ideas teachers form about a student's academic ability or potential. In my experience, every teacher has perceptions of his or her students, and these perceptions lead to the day-to-day decisions made in the classroom. Brophy (1985) suggested that perceptions of students as individuals are not as influential as teachers' perceptions of them as a class. Rubie-Davies (2007) also noted that teachers' perceptions of their classes were more influential than perceptions of individual students in her research two decades later. Based on these claims, a teacher may perceive an individual to be smart, but the teacher's interactions with the class as a whole are more influential on the students as well as how the class is taught.

Tracked Classes

Finley (1984) conducted an ethnographic study in a high school English department. She interviewed and observed the teachers' experiences in the classes with an emphasis on how the different track levels were taught as classes were separated by a perceived ability level. According to the author, the teachers taught the classes very differently—with more time spent on routine and life-skills in lower-level tracks, and classical literature and writing in the upper-level tracks. The decisions made toward a specified curriculum were conscious decisions made by the teachers, which the researcher attributed to the teachers' perception of their students' ability. Both separate spaces and different curricula were provided to the students based on their track levels. In such an environment, Finley (1984) found that many teachers associated

teaching the higher-track classes with rewarding experiences and teaching lower tracks with unrewarding experiences. The teachers attributed their experiences in the lower-track classes to the students not being as interested in the class as those in the higher-level classrooms.

Interviews from the study revealed that the teachers did not mention a possible correlation between student apathy and placement in the lower-tracked classes. Finley's (1984) study showcased the idea that teachers do not realize that the perceptions they have of students in a given track level may cause, at least in part, differences in how they teach the classes.

Oakes' (1985) examined data from 299 tracked mathematics and English classes. Mathematics and English were chosen because these two academic disciplines were the most consistently tracked in her sample of schools across the country. Oakes (1985) primarily focused on what was being taught in the classrooms and how it was taught. Oakes' work indicated the harmful effects of tracking and suggested that tracking pushed the American education system in the wrong direction. In order to systematically attack tracking as it existed at the time of publication, Oakes (1985) went after the assumptions underlying tracking. One of the assumptions Oakes worked against was the notion that tracked classes are beneficial to all levels of students. Oakes argued that tracked classes did not benefit students at any level and research did not show that lower-track students impeded the learning of higher-track students if placed in the same classes. Another assumption was that tracking protected the lower-track students' self-esteem by not placing them alongside their more adept peers. Oakes found that separation into different physical spaces did not protect lower-track students' self-esteem as previously mentioned, mostly because of how the lower-track classes functioned. Oakes' (1985) findings were similar to what other researchers found prior to her work. Upper-track classes spent more time on critical thinking skills and abstract ideas (Anyon, 1981). Alternatively, the lower-track

classes spent much more time on rote memorization of facts, worksheets, and procedures (Anyon, 1981; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Finley, 1984). Oakes also emphasized the omission of some curriculum in the lower-track classes because it was deemed out of reach or irrelevant for the students. Students who were perceived to be of low intellect met the low expectations ascribed to them and those who were afforded higher expectations reached for them. This finding is much like that of Rist (1970) and Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) findings. The results highlighted how dull lower-track classes left students with larger learning gaps than when they entered the lower-track. The higher-track classes in her study were also disproportionately white and middle-class students, while the lower-track classes were full of minorities from working-class families (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Oakes (1985) concluded that lower-track students develop larger learning gaps while in their track level that highlights the differences in how tracked classes are taught and the effect it has on the students in the classes.

Using a much smaller sample size than Oakes (1985), Page (1987) conducted a yearlong interpretive study where she split her time between two schools as a participant observer. In her study, she investigated how tracking affected school culture. Page emphasized the differentiated curriculum in the regular- and lower-tracks to learn more about teachers' perceptions of their students and how the perceptions affected the classrooms. The interviews the researcher conducted were of the participating teachers, students, support staff, and administrators. She also collected field notes from several informal interactions during her observations in addition to audiotaping the lessons in the lower-track classroom. Page (1987) examined specific instances from observations to either affirm or contradict other data. From her study, Page (1987) concluded that the teachers' perceptions of their students, while different based on track level, were complex and highly contextualized. Her conclusion placed much responsibility on

the teacher, school, and community in creating the culture of the classroom. Page witnessed that perceptions were different in the lower-track classes of all the schools she observed. However, Page (1987) stressed that blame could not be ascribed to the participants in the tracking system due to the “profoundly complex and interactive nature of the sociocultural variables and processes through which the meaning of curriculum differentiation is produced” (p. 96). Page’s study was important because the findings reaffirm the previously documented trend that teachers’ perceptions do vary based on track level. The study did not place the blame on the teacher; similarly, Finley’s (1984) findings also viewed the teachers as actors in the structure of tracking and not to blame them for the differing perceptions based on the notion that they are constantly subjected to the tracking system.

Almost two decades later, a mixed methods study by Caughlan and Kelly (2004) investigated the role tracking played in the literacy development of one teacher’s high school literature classes based on instructional differences. By using both quantitative and qualitative methods, the researchers were able to compare both the academic performance of the students across track levels and the classroom decisions of the teacher. Quantitative methods were used to measure instructional time spent in the classroom, with particular attention on discipline and instructions/directions. These data were triangulated with two participant interviews as well as audiotaped lessons deemed representative of the instructor’s class. The qualitative data were used to determine differences in how the teacher represented subject matter and instruction during the observed classes. Caughlan and Kelly (2004) conducted their study based on the question of whether the track level determined the quality of instruction the student received based on preconceived ideas the teachers held and their perceptions of the students. In an effort to “discover how the teacher’s alignments (vis-à-vis the subject matter and her students) and how

her teaching strategies influenced the character of classroom instruction,” the researchers decided to hold the teacher as a constant and have one participant (p. 26). The interviews did not yield any evidence of deficit thinking on behalf of the participants, but there were major differences in how the classes were taught. Higher-track students were engaged in the lesson with the teacher more often than in the lower-track classes. Moreover, Caughlan and Kelly (2004) considered the curriculum in the higher track as more coherent because the discussions and activities pertained to assigned readings more often than in the lower track. The authors’ study beckoned teachers to challenge and motivate all students as opposed to just the higher track.

Watanabe’s (2008) ethnographic case study examined two middle school Language Arts teachers who taught classes in multiple tracks. The researcher analyzed the instructional opportunities of students in different track levels in the context of high-stakes statewide accountability. The research site was located in North Carolina, where a system of incentives and sanctions determined by test scores were enacted more than five years prior to the research. Watanabe collected data through observations, interviews, and student samples to learn how the high-stakes accountability movement affected teaching in different track levels. Watanabe (2008) concluded that the policies and practices of high-stakes accountability not only failed to break down the stratifications of the tracking system, but may also have worsened the gap between tracks. The students in the regular-track level focused on test preparation, while students in the higher-track classes engaged in critical thinking skills and examined current events. Interestingly, Watanabe did not place blame on the participants for knowingly propagating inequities in their classrooms. He explained, “...Teachers’ actions are shaped by the structural organization of schools and the underlying expectations these policies connote, even if teachers do not always explicitly identify these factors in discussions about their curricular decisions” (p. 528). The idea of teachers as

mere actors in the tracking system and not to blame for the inequities of tracking was a finding that echoed previous research (Finley, 1984; Page, 1987).

Worthy (2010) also conducted a study in a middle grades setting and explored tracking in Language Arts classes. There were a total of eight middle schools that participated and 25 sixth grade teachers who taught both higher- and lower-tracked classes within those schools. The research was conducted in an ethnically diverse Texas school district where over half of the student population lived in poverty. Data collection consisted of interviews with each of the teachers lasting between 45-60 minutes each and 18 classroom observations. More than half of the participants in the study mentioned differences in how the teachers viewed the students based on track level, even without any prompting regarding tracking. Worthy (2010) found that many of the teachers' claims in the interviews were generalizations of the track level and not indicative of individual students. One of the participants in particular even explicitly mentioned home life as a major difference regarding how students in different tracks were motivated. Worthy also found that the teachers' perceptions of their students largely determined the differential instruction between track levels. The students in the higher-track classes were held to a higher standard than students in the lower-track classes. In addition, the higher-track students were given more opportunities to attempt complex work than their lower-track track peers. The teachers may be inhibiting the lower-track students' academic growth by denying them these opportunities.

Most studies separated students into completely separate categories based on their track level, but Kelly and Carbonaro (2012) broke the mold with their work. The researchers conducted a quantitative study of high school discrepant course takers—students who had classes in different tracks—and examined the teachers' perceptions of college attainment for students

based on track level. The authors collected data from a larger study and obtained information about both the students and teachers. Using ordered logit models, Kelly and Carbonaro (2012) compared academic achievement, behavior, and college expectations with the students' teachers across the track levels. Once this information was obtained, Kelly and Carbonaro adjusted for behavior and achievement between tracks to determine if there was a difference in the teachers' perceptions. The authors concluded that track level did affect the teachers' perceptions of their students regarding college attainment. In addition, track level also affected the students' perceptions of whether they would go to college. Students had higher expectations for college attendance in higher-track classes than in their lower-track classes. Kelly and Carbonaro (2012) also found that track level mediated the teachers' beliefs of whether their students' college aspirations were accurate or not. This result echoed previous research that class placement may be more important than the individual student in determining their experiences with their teachers (Brophy, 1985; Rubie-Davies, 2007).

Wilcox's (2015) ethnographic case study examined higher- and lower-track students' experiences with writing across curriculum areas and how the experiences differed based on different backgrounds. Furthermore, the researcher also inquired into the kinds of writing assignments the students participated in based on track level. The study involved both an urban high school and the district's middle school, using students in grades 8, 10, and 12. In order to collect data that would yield a thick description, Wilcox used memos, field notes, observations, interviews, student work, and member-checked data with school faculty throughout the study. The number of written assignments did not differ between tracks in Wilcox's (2015) study, but the expectations for the quality of work differed greatly. Wilcox highlighted two major differences in the lower-track classes: the teachers' perception of their students writing ability;

and extended time spent on basic vocabulary and mechanical tasks. The expectations verbalized by the teacher in the higher-track classes during instructions were more complex, and they did not spend as much time on basic vocabulary. Wilcox warned that the teachers' perception of the lower-track students often left them at a disadvantage.

Donaldson, LeChasseur, and Mayer (2016) conducted a mixed methods study in high school mathematics and English Language Arts classes and examined instructional quality across track levels. They observed 149 classes across six schools that represented differing socio-economic levels. During observations, the researchers took field notes and scored the teachers across three dimensions: emotional support, organizational support, and instructional support. The field notes were used to create cases of the classes observed and a rating system was used to compare the classes to each other. Donaldson et al. (2016) confirmed that lower-track classes in their sample had lower scores in all three categories studied (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), which was consistent with previous research. Analyses of emotional support in the lower-track classes presented higher levels of insensitivity, little regard for the students' perspectives in the classroom, and negativity exhibited by the teacher. Lower-track classrooms also displayed poor organizational support characterized by less instructional variety and structure. Lastly, the Donaldson et al. found that instructional support in the lower-track classrooms lagged behind other classes in the areas of both content understanding and problem solving.

Tracked Classes in Summary

Research studies in tracked classes showcased that lower-track classes were less desirable to teach (Finley, 1984) and that the classes were also less desirable to be in as a student (Donaldson et al., 2016). In addition, lower-track classes often had a less coherent curriculum (Caughlan & Kelly, 2004), and a greater focus on rote memorization (Hand, 2010; Oakes, 1985;

Wilcox, 2015; Worthy, 2010). How tracked classes are taught may compound structural inequities for students and cause differential expectations of college attainment based on track level (Kelly & Carbonaro, 2012). However, despite the literature that condemns the tracking system based on the inherent inequitable conditions, some researchers suggested that the teachers within the tracking system should not be held accountable for the structural inequalities because they are merely actors in the larger structure (Page, 1987; Watanabe, 2008). One reason not to blame teachers for the inequalities of the tracking system lies in the notion that the conditions are structural, and individual teachers cannot change the structure on their own.

As the studies in the previous section suggest, non-tracked classes also exhibit inequalities based on teacher perceptions. However, the inequities in non-tracked classes are more closely aligned with how teachers determine intellectual potential and not track levels the students are ascribed to before entering the class. The literature in non-tracked classes also includes elementary schools as sites for research, which were not included in the tracking literature because schools do not typically track students this early.

Non-Tracked Classes

Formal tracking begins largely in middle or junior high school. Elementary schools do not typically have formal tracking and I have designated studies in these schools as being non-tracked. The studies did not designate the schools as being detracked schools, so it can be assumed that they are among the few schools that do not track. In addition, I also placed other studies which did not examine tracked classes as non-tracked classes. I begin with Dreeben and Gamoran (1986), who conducted a quantitative study of over 300 Chicago-area first grade students to shed light on how the social constructs of aptitude, race, and socio-economic status impacted learning in the classroom. The researchers represented a wide range of economic and

racial backgrounds in their sample, while variations in aptitude were assumed based on the idea that dissimilarities existed within every classroom. Reading instruction and word attainment were examined, and the researchers observed each class in the study a dozen times throughout the school year. During the observations, the length of reading instruction was recorded and categorized as whole class, group, or individual reading instruction. The researchers found that instructional quality had the largest effect on word attainment. Evidence from the study suggested that word attainment was determined by the students' group placement in each classroom. Placement in groups with higher mean aptitude scores translated into more time allocated to word coverage and a greater availability of curricular materials. Students in the groups with a lower mean aptitude score spent less time on word attainment. The teachers' perceptions of their students' abilities were determined to be the primary factor in how much the students learned because they determined the group placement.

Hatt (2012) also conducted research in an elementary school, immersing herself in a classroom for an entire year and only intervening if a student directly went to her with a question. Her ethnographic study of a kindergarten classroom examined the impact of how a teacher perceived her students' 'smartness'. Smartness was framed as a mechanism to position oneself socially and "as a tool utilized by some not only to determine the social identities of others, but to make sense of their own identity" (p. 439). Academic identity also played a big role in relation to smartness, as both an instrument of social positioning and an expression of possible ability. Hatt's (2012) study found kindergarten students were subject to the teacher's perceptions that the researcher claimed to be primarily determined by race and socio-economic status, a finding that is similar to previous research conducted in different grades levels (Anyon, 1981). In addition, the teacher's perceptions of ability or smartness affected the exchanges

between the teacher and the students. The conversations were more caring and empathetic between the teacher and students who were believed to be smart when compared to the conversations between the teacher and students who were not considered to be as smart. Other findings included differences in how the students treated each other based on perceived smartness. The students whom the adults considered to be smart were more socially desirable. Students who did not hold these qualities were not sought out to be friends as often by their peers. The interactions between the teacher and her students during instruction later affected the students' interpersonal relations during unstructured time.

Another study that examined teachers' perceptions of their students' ability was Diamond, Randolph, and Spillane (2004). These researchers focused on whether or not teachers took responsibility for their students learning and evaluated the role that teachers' perceptions of their students played. The foundation of the study was based on previous research that claimed race and social class were factors that perpetuated a deterministic self-fulfilling prophecy. Both the teachers and the administrators were participants in the study. Their study was ethnographic in nature and the researchers spent six months in five urban elementary schools. The researchers observed classrooms, meetings, and professional development trainings, and conducted semi-structured interviews with the teachers and the administrators. The data were coded to shed light upon what the participants identified as students' assets, traits considered to be positive, or deficits, which were traits considered to be negative. The findings revealed that schools whose majority was white, Chinese, or middle-class typically emphasized assets at a much higher rate than the predominantly African American or low-income schools, which were fairly consistent with previous research. However, the researchers found that one of the schools did not follow this trend. The school was different from the rest of the sample, and it served a 100 percent

African American population, with a smaller portion low-income students than the other schools. This led the researchers to conclude that social class mediated “the devaluing of African American status demonstrated in previous research” (p. 83). In other words, the middle-class status of the African American school had an effect of focuses more on assets than deficits. The researchers also found schools with higher emphases on students’ deficits took less responsibility for the children’s learning than schools with more emphases on students’ assets. Low expectations prevail when schools shirk responsibility for the students in low-income and predominantly African American schools instead of addressing possible structural and organizational explanations (Kozol, 2005).

Along with the studies conducted in elementary schools, there were also a few studies conducted in secondary schools that did not consider tracking as a variable or did not have tracked classes. For instance, Harris (2012) examined secondary schools in her five-year mixed methods study of five middle schools. Her study was an evaluation of a school reform initiative that centered on the implementation of a standards-based curriculum and how it affected academic progress. Most of the schools served majority populations that were either African American or Latino, and all schools in the sample served large populations of low-income students. All of the schools were observed multiple times during each school year, and the researchers gave multiple surveys and interviewed all parties involved in the implementation of the curriculum initiative. The data emphasized how participants used deficit beliefs regarding the students’ intellectual abilities, culture, home lives, or motivation as reasons for lack of academic progress. Harris (2012) also noted the presence of racially-based stereotypes in the responses. When teachers use deficit beliefs to ascribe blame for lack of progress, it allowed them to avoid responsibility. Perhaps more importantly, ascribing blame through perceived

deficiencies also holds the possibility of having negative effects on students' self-image as well as their academic career (Diamond et al., 2004; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

Nespor (1985) conducted an ethnographic study with eight junior high English and mathematics teachers. The teachers were videotaped and interviewed over the course of a semester to examine the teachers' beliefs about their roles, focus as teachers, their students, the curriculum, and the school in which they taught. The study was primarily concerned with why teachers acted in particular ways and what drove their experiences. Although there were a few exceptions, most of the participants in the study did not teach tracked classes and tracking was not examined as a factor in Nespor's study. At the conclusion of the research, Nespor (1985) was left with an understanding that the teachers in her study did not focus on the quality of experiences they had as teachers. Instead, the teachers concentrated on things such as how many years they taught or the degree they obtained. Also, the author stressed the focus of junior high schools as a major transition period for teachers in how they regard their work. The transition occurred in the conception of teachers' roles from emphasizing building relationships with individual students to primarily being concerned with the subject matter and how they presented it. For the students, there were also structural transitions in their school day, such as moving from class to class for the first time and being grouped throughout the day based on ability. It is possible that the stressors associated with the added transitions that students functioned within influenced on the teachers' perception of their students.

Specifically concentrating on mathematics teachers, Nespor (1985) found there to be differences in how the teachers functioned. Math classes were focused on well-defined skills determined primarily by textbooks and teachers, as opposed to more general qualifications in other subjects. For the researcher, there seemed to be a particularity about mathematics in how it

was conceptualized by the participants, and how they viewed their experiences. These differences could contribute to a different line of thinking in regards to how math teachers view their tracked students.

Non-Tracked Classes Section Summary

Elementary schools, while not typically tracked, are still not immune to inequities. Dreeben and Gamoran (1986) found that elementary school teachers based the creation of groups on perceived abilities. In turn, the groups labeled as lower ability were not given the same opportunities to succeed as their peers who were perceived as having higher ability. Hatt's (2012) study of a single teacher also showed the differential treatment of elementary school students based on perceived ability. Despite the notion that tracking is a more rigid system of ability grouping following students from year to year, the effects of in-class ability grouping in these two studies still had a negative effect on the students observed in both studies. Diamond et al. (2004) presented cases where teachers of white and Chinese students of middle-class backgrounds primarily concentrated on the students' assets, while their counterparts who taught predominantly African-American working-class students fixated on students' deficits. This notion that race is a factor in the teacher's perception of her students has been echoed in other research (Ansalone, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 1995). This gives credence to the idea that the issues surrounding class and race transcend the structure of tracking. Nespor's (1985) study followed a different line of research, which highlighted how middle-grades teachers were less concerned with building relationships with students and more concerned with the curriculum. If the results of this study are transferable, the argument could be made that decisions regarding grouping are even less informed in middle grades than in elementary schools because the teachers are not as familiar with the individual students.

Detracked Classes

Detracked classes, or classes which were formally tracked at some point but are not any longer, are more common in the last fifteen years as the negative effects of tracking have become better documented. Detracked schools have become research sites for how teachers perceive their students and in many cases, the research is used to find out if the process of detracking has made the school more equitable. Rubin (2003) was influenced by the inherent inequities in the tracking system and the possibility for hope that detracking held. She conducted a year-long ethnographic case study to better understand how students and teachers enacted detracking in practice. In order to see if detracking combated inequities toward low-income and minority students, two well-documented groups often harmed by tracking, the researcher chose a site with both racial and socioeconomic diversity. Based on her understanding that detracking was carried out differently from teacher to teacher, Rubin chose two teachers who taught a shared group of ninth-grade students, who were participants in the study. The study included observations, interviews, classroom artifacts, shadowing the students throughout the year, and weekly updates from the teachers involved in the study. Rubin (2003) parsed the data into categories that represented either teacher understanding or student interpretation of detracking practices. Her study emphasized the teachers' commitment to detracking in the most equitable manner possibly, evident in both explanations of teaching practices and discussions with the teachers in interviews. The students, however, experienced something much different. Their interpretations of detracking was marked by forced groupings of students for group activities, which brought out racial and class tensions in the classroom. These tensions caused by the forced groupings in the classroom were antithetical to the purpose of detracking and caused problems for the teacher.

In another school that was not very successful in detracking, Hand (2010) studied an eighth-grade mathematics classroom in a public middle school that attempted to detrack. Despite the attempt to detrack at the school level, the author witnessed unofficial tracking based on the teacher's perception of his students' ability level. Much like teachers in tracked schools, the teacher's differentiated pace and curriculum covered in the classroom was based on his perceived ability levels of the students. However, it is possible that after many years of teaching in a tracked setting, the teacher was conditioned to teach and structure his class based on his previous teaching experience. In comparing the unofficial track levels, Hand (2010) observed more student opposition, or disruptive behavior, in the lower track than in the higher track.

Boaler (2006) experienced something quite different when she studied mathematics classes in an urban California high school. She executed a four-year study on detracking practices in high school math classes. The data were collected through interviews, observations, questionnaires, and annual assessments given to the students. Of the research sites in the study, one particular school displayed significantly more equitable classrooms along with higher test scores after detracking. Boaler (2006) suggested that the school's success was due in part to the curriculum and how it was taught. However, the primary rationale for the school's success was attributed to the specific behaviors exhibited by the math teachers. The teachers held high expectations for all students, focused on inclusion of low status students, and stressed effort over ability. The effects were not only seen in the teaching practices and the test scores, but the students involved in the study also echoed them. It is important to note that this is the only study in which detracking seemed to have made a significant difference in the structural inequities.

Detracking Section Summary

Rubin (2003) showed an example of how detracking structurally failed to combat inequities in the class despite all the best intentions. Hand's (2010) study proved to be another example of how simply detracking classes does not solve all the issues commonly found in tracked classes. In her study, informal tracking still occurred but focused more on race and the students' perceived ability levels. The exception to these two studies is Boaler's (2006) study. The researcher found that the possibility for equitable classrooms existed when all parties involved were highly committed to equitable teaching and learning.

In this study, I wanted to find out whether equitable classrooms are possible in the tracking system. Boaler's study, although not in a tracked class, showed the power that teachers hold to cultivate a more equitable classroom. If it is possible to create a more equitable classroom in detracked classes, it is my hypothesis that teachers may hold the power to do so within a tracked class as well.

Gaps in the Literature

The perceptions teachers hold for their students based on track level influence pedagogical decisions (Anyon, 1981; Caughlan & Kelly, 2004; Oakes, 1985; Watanabe, 2008; Wilcox, 2015; Worthy, 2010). Research in the field of education also highlights how teachers construct their perceptions of students' ability levels. These constructs influence both the interactions as well as the expectations in the classroom. Research also overwhelmingly suggests how teachers ascribe low-track students to lower expectations (Finley, 1984; Kelly & Carbonaro, 2012; Oakes, 1985; Page, 1987), thus denying or limiting the students' opportunities. While the existing research is typically consistent regarding teachers' perceptions of their students, there are some

underdeveloped areas in the research this study will address. These gaps pertain to the setting of the research study and the roles of the researcher and the participant. By consciously choosing to work on closing the gaps in the research, this study is designed to contribute to what is known about teachers' perceptions with regard to tracking.

One of the gaps in the literature I addressed with my research concerned the roles of the researcher and the participant. Many researchers in this vein of literature interviewed teachers; however, teacher involvement typically ended and did not explicitly include an opportunity for the participant to reflect on or explain specific incidents deemed important to the researcher. I hoped to bridge that gap in the literature and use a protocol that asked the participant to reflect on her teaching and explore how her teaching and beliefs intersected. I employed video-cued interviews, which asked the teacher to watch and provide commentary from clips of her teaching. By including the teacher's voice and engaging her in dialogue, I added two important aspects to my study. First, her explanation of the experiences in the classroom and the rationale for her pedagogical decisions added depth and meaning to my data. Second, by engaging with the participant in dialogue, I attempted to change the traditional power dynamic in educational research. The traditional power dynamic is characterized by the researcher alone interpreting what occurs in the classroom. This study shifts that dynamic back to the teacher and allows her voice to be heard.

I also addressed the gap in the literature that concerned the research setting. Although math studies were represented in the literature, only one of the studies reviewed was conducted exclusively in a tracked math classroom (Hand, 2010). Echoing Lerman (2000), math classes are highly tracked due to the widely-accepted belief linking math ability to an intellectual capacity. This belief creates a unique space for mathematics classes when examining tracking. Examining

teachers' perceptions of their students in a tracked mathematics course then becomes particularly important to learn about pedagogical decision-making.

Chapter Summary

The early literature on teachers' perceptions of their students' ability levels illustrated the notion of the self-fulfilling prophesy, in which the perceived beliefs regarding students came to fruition. Additionally, the early studies showed that working-class and minority students were typically perceived to be of lower intellect and given lower expectations than other students. Teachers' perceptions of tracked students mirrored much of the previous literature before the emphasis on tracking. As tracking became more pervasive in the American education system, teachers' perceptions of their students aligned more with the track level the students were assigned, with working-class and minority students often being overrepresented in the lower-track classes. The literature pertinent to this study provides a narrative for tracking in the American education system that suggests inequalities found elsewhere in the education system that are built in to the tracking system. I hope to add to the work regarding teachers' perceptions of tracked students and uncover one of the many possibilities of how tracked classes are taught.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The literature in the field has repeatedly shown that teaching looks decidedly different depending on which track level is being taught. Teaching is more interactive and follows a coherent flow in the gifted classes (Caughlan & Kelly, 2004). In the classes that are not gifted, there is more of a focus on routine and discipline (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Finley, 1984). However, teaching in tracked classes does not have to be this way and may not, depending on the teacher.

The purpose of this study is to examine how a math teacher's perceptions of her students based on track level informs her pedagogical decision-making. The research questions guiding this study include the following:

- RQ₁: How does a teacher's perceptions of groups of students she teaches compare to each other based on track level?
- RQ₂: What does teaching look like in tracked classes?
- RQ₃: Where does a teacher's perception of her class intersect with the strategies employed?

Methodology

This qualitative research design is grounded in the need to understand a teacher's perceptions of her students in practice as she works with students of various tracks. Ideally, the goal is to understand the teacher's perspective regarding how tracked classes should look.

Maxwell (2013) found this type of meaning making as an intellectual goal of qualitative research. For Merriam (1998), making meaning of the realities people construct through their experiences lends itself to qualitative research. Her view of reality is not objective, but one that is interpreted through her experiences and interactions. The reality of how a teacher perceives her students is complicated, involving not only the teacher's philosophy of teaching, but also including the decisions she makes in the many interactions with her classroom. To understand the participant and her perceptions, a rich description of the teacher and a recognition of how she interprets her interactions with the students are needed.

There is no hypothesis to test with this research. The study was conducted to understand how two disparate classes functioned based on the teacher's perceptions of the groups of students. The purpose was not to go into the research with a preconceived idea of what may happen, but, as Prasad (2005) suggested, to come to an "intimate understanding of social situations...from the standpoint of the participant" (p.23). This concept helped lead to the decision to use case study methodology to examine the classes and study the teacher's interactions with her students. The goal was to understand what these interactions mean in the specific context of the classroom. The observed interactions were specific to the teacher and were bound by both time and place. Contextualizing the time and place was important because they both assisted in situating the power dynamic in the classroom as well as informed the teacher of what track level student she was teaching.

This case study was grounded in Merriam's (1998) case study framework. This decision was based on a shared acceptance of constructivism and its application to case study research. Merriam (1998) asserted that case study research is conducted through a particular lens and construction of how the researcher views the world. Similarly, the research was also conducted

based on how the researcher interacts with the participant's construction of the world. Making sense of the world in such a manner is considered a constructivist or existentialist view, where the focus is placed on how the individuals make sense of their realities. Merriam (1998) defined case study as "intensive descriptions and analyses of a *single unit* or *bounded system* (Smith, 1978) such as an individual, program, event, group, interventions, or community" (p. 19). Case study research examines a phenomenon as it exists within its context and provides an exhaustive description of the phenomenon. This approach to research requires an in-depth understanding of the unit of study (Hays, 2004) to represent or depict the case accurately, define, and recognize the limits and boundaries in which the case exists.

In further characterizing case study research, Merriam (1998) described case studies as "particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic" (p. 29). Case studies are particularistic, meaning they concentrate on a phenomenon and the data collected are unique to the case. Emphasizing this point is the assertion that case studies are not intended to be generalized to represent a topic but to describe the specific context of the case being studied (Stake, 1995). The unique nature of the case is made apparent by the thick description given by the researcher. This exhaustive description of the case also enables the researcher to provide a comprehensive analysis of how the case functions within its context. Case studies are heuristic, implying they provide the reader with an understanding of the phenomenon being studied based on the experiences of both the researcher and participant (Patton, 2002). This understanding stems from focusing the research on the individual case, often from the perspective of the participant (Prasad, 2005).

One of the goals of this research was to increase the understanding of how children are treated and taught in a tracked classroom through providing a thick description of the case. Previous research has indicated that some teachers did treat students differently based on some

preconceived notion teachers held about their students (Hand, 2010; Hatt, 2012; Worthy, 2010). There has recently been only one study conducted in a middle grades math classroom on the topic of how teachers' preconceived ideas of their students affect how they are treated in the classroom (Hand, 2010). One of the aims of this research was to provide an account of how a middle grades math teacher interacts with her students based on the track level. This study explored the issue of tracking and provides insights into how a middle school math teacher conducts class based on track level.

Under the umbrella of case study research, there are many classifications that specify the purposes of the research. Merriam (1998) referred to case studies that are similar to this one as interpretive case studies. She emphasized that interpretive case studies are intended to interpret, analyze, and theorize about the data collected from the study so as to “develop conceptual categories or to illustrate, support, or challenge theoretical assumptions held prior to data gathering” (p. 38). Interpretive case studies may approach the interpretation of data in a variety of ways and degrees. For example, Merriam contended that one researcher could use grounded theory to generate a new theory from research, while another researcher may use data to find correlations between cases. Using what Merriam identified as an interpretive case study, this research study was situated as one that places importance on a thick, rich description. The purpose of creating a thick description of the case in an interpretive study is to facilitate a deep, meaningful analysis for the purpose of increasing the level of understanding of how the case works. It also allows the reader to analyze the case more accurately.

In this study, I used a single case of a sixth-grade mathematics teacher who taught multiple track levels of the same course. Using one teacher across different track levels, Caughlan and Kelly (2004) suggested, enables the researcher to “hold the teacher constant” (p.

26). “Because tracked classes differ along so many dimensions,” Caughlan and Kelly (2004) explained, it is “difficult to sort out what the fundamental sources of differences in instruction across ability groups are, and how they contribute to grouping’s effects” (p. 21). Holding the teacher as a constant “overcomes some of [the] difficulty” caused by the multiple dimensions “by comparing two classes taught by the same teacher” (p. 21). Essentially, using the same teacher minimizes the effect of the teacher as a variable in the study. Conducting this study with a single case also allowed me to focus on providing a thorough description of the participant, given her unique experiences and interactions as well as how her perceptions influenced her pedagogical decisions. Her experiences leading up to the study, interactions with students during the study, and beliefs held that influenced her teaching were unique to her as an individual, making the case particularistic.

One advantage of employing case study research is the flexibility it affords. Case study research does not set prescribed methods of data collection or analysis, which allows the researcher space to use the research to generate ideas and interpretations from the data itself (Merriam, 1998). Since case study research is not bound by a specific form of data analysis, case study research provides an opportunity for the researcher to utilize multiple methods of data collection (Patton, 2002). Maxwell (2013) argued “less structured approaches . . . allow you to focus on the particular phenomena being studied” and can give more “flexibility to respond to emergent insights” (p. 88). Such flexibility in this study allows space for ideas to emerge from the data instead of a more prescriptive approach that could possibly limit insights in the analysis stage.

One obstacle to consider when conducting a case study is the possibility of either over-exaggeration or being a reductionist with the case (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). I resolved this

problem through provisions in the research design that combated researcher bias. One such provision was the emphasis on including the participant's perspective through the use of multiple video-cued interviews. The research design called for the participant to recount her decisions from the classroom observation footage and provide feedback on her decisions. The choice to have the participant provide explanations for the instances I deemed critical to the study provided checks and balances in the research process. The balance of researcher and participant voice in the research design allowed me to make initial decisions about what stood out as important in the classroom observations, but then opened up dialogue about the teacher's actual decision-making process.

Methods

Selection of Research Setting

The aim of this study was to uncover as much as possible about how an individual teacher's pedagogical decision-making varies based on the track level of the class. Tracking primarily exists in middle and high schools, with much of the research being conducted in a high school setting. However, middle grade classrooms offer a unique space for the examination of how teachers perceive their tracked students. This uniqueness is because middle schools are typically the first setting in which schools create intellectually homogenous classes for the majority of the day (Mulkey, Catsambis, Steelman, & Crain, 2005). More specifically, sixth grade is commonly the first year there is a physical separation of students into different spaces for the entire day based on a track level, making it advantageous to use sixth grade. The physical separation of students into different classes by their track is crucial to this study, and provides two distinctly different classes with different expectations to examine. This study was conducted

in a sixth grade mathematics class due to the advantage sixth grade offered over the other two grades in a middle school. It was the first time in which the students were separated by perceived ability in to separate track levels.

At the time of this study, I gained approval from the Pleasantville County Schools (pseudonym) to conduct my dissertation study at a middle school in the county. After reaching out to all of the middle school principals, I received permission to conduct the study only from the principal at Hope Middle School (pseudonym). The school offered separate classes to students who were labeled as gifted for the entire academic day. Within the district, sixth grade provided the students with their first opportunity to be separated from their same-aged peers for a significant period of time in the school day. Prior to entering middle school, the students participated in what was called a “pull out” program, which means that the students were taken out of their homeroom classes to receive accelerated mathematics instruction each week.

Benefits and Limitations of the Research Setting

The research site, like all sites, offered some benefits, but it also had its limitations. One of the benefits of the research site was my familiarity with the school. I was employed at the school for six years as a teacher at the time of the study. I was immersed in the community in several ways prior to my study, serving as a teacher, academic tutor, basketball coach, and mentor in a Saturday-school program. My relationship with the research site afforded me distinctive advantages in knowing how the gifted program functioned at the school and district level as well as the expectations for both gifted and non-gifted students. Also, it was both practical and convenient to use Hope Middle School to conduct my research study. Although this benefit was not directly related to the study, the amount of time out of work was a stressor

on me as a full-time teacher at the time of the study. Using my workplace as the site meant that I spent the minimal amount of time out of work.

An important limitation to note is that I was familiar with the participating teacher as I had worked in the same building as her for six years. Our familiarity with one another was purely professional. However, conducting research with a participant who is also a colleague does have its downfalls. I discuss the precautions I took to limit any possible coercion to participate within the selection of the research participant in a following section. In addition, my research design minimized my interpretation of the critical incidents by focusing on the participant's interpretation of the incidents in the video-cued interviews. I derived my analysis from these interviews with the participant and not the critical incidents themselves. I also spaced out the observations over the course of a semester to normalize my presence as much as possible for both the participant and her students. This precaution was to account for any possible changes in how she would act with an observer in the room.

Description of Research Setting

The middle school where this study took place is located in the southeastern United States, and the school district is made up of what is commonly referred to as an urban fringe school, which means that the district is split between the outskirts of a town and a rural area. On one side of the school is a significant area dedicated to Section 8 housing, and on the other side are horse farms and moderately large estates. This diverse landscape that makes up the school district shows in the school as well, although there is a large percentage of the upper-middle class families who chose to take their children to a private school located in the nearest town. Over half of the student population is comprised of students from working-class families, while many of the others are middle-class and even fewer upper-middle class students. The student

population is approximately 45 percent white, 45 percent African American, 3 percent Asian Pacific Islander, and 3 percent Hispanic, with the rest identifying as multi-racial. The school had a population of just over 900 students in the 2015-2016 school year and was comprised of students from sixth grade to eighth grade. Each grade level was made up of three “pods” of teachers. Each pod was comprised of four teachers, one for each of the major disciplines. Two of the pods on each grade level taught gifted students during the day. However, the population for the gifted students is low enough to result in these teachers teaching both gifted and non-gifted students within the school day.

Selection of Research Participant

There were certain criteria that needed to be met for the selection of a participant in this study. First, the teacher needed to teach both gifted and a non-gifted classes. Second, I chose to select a teacher whose non-gifted class did not have any students labeled with a learning disability. The reasoning for this decision was that such a student would have an individualized educational plan (IEP) that would dictate many of the teacher’s decisions in the class and skew the data. Finally, I selected a participant that taught mathematics. Math provided an important setting for my research because the tracking system sorts children based on a perceived intellectual ability, and mathematical ability is commonly linked to intellectual ability (Lerman, 2000). Most schools have more rigid tracks for their math classes because of this commonly acknowledged link. Another reason for conducting my research in a mathematics class was due to the lack of research I examined in middle-grades math classes, with only one study exclusively conducting research in a math classroom (Hand, 2010). Conducting my study in a math class added to the research in the area and highlighted the relationship between the teacher and students in a highly tracked discipline.

At the approved site, there were only two teachers who met the criteria for my study. Neither of the teachers held any position of power over me or me over them. In addition, my relationship with both potential participants was only professional. In order to recruit a participant without influencing her decision to participate, I placed a flyer in the two individual's mailboxes with a description of the study and my phone number (see Appendix A for the recruitment flyer). There was not any other identifier on the flyer. One of the individuals contacted me and expressed an interest in participating in the study. I identified myself as one of her colleagues and gave her an opportunity to withdraw her interest, to which she declined. At that point, I gave her a consent form to look over (see Appendix B for the consent form) and sign before we began.

Description of Participant and Her Initial Ideas of Tracking

The participant in this study was a white female who was in her tenth year of teaching at the time of the study. All ten years had been at Hope Middle School, where she taught many different subjects throughout those ten years. She taught family and consumer sciences, yearbook, and math in all three grades offered at the middle school. She had been teaching both gifted and non-gifted sixth-grade math for two years at the time of this study. She lived in the community and matriculated through school in a neighboring county. In the classroom, she described herself as motherly and stressed making connections with the students as a way to motivate them to do their best.

From the beginning, Mrs. Cleaver was made aware that the study was on the topic of her perceptions and expectations of her students across track levels. She was told that the purpose of the study was to examine how she taught tracked classes in relation to one another. In our introductory interview, she described tracking as “almost necessary” so as not to “hurt” the

gifted students or leave the regular students behind (February 22, 2016). She said that she enjoyed teaching both for different reasons. In the same interview, she claimed that she felt more successful by teaching the gifted students, but at the same time, she said she was needed more by the regular students. Mrs. Cleaver described the gifted class as being more prepared and organized than her non-gifted classes. She claimed that they had a general knowledge of understanding the expectations and that this may have been a testament to more supportive parents and a better home life. Mrs. Cleaver felt that this class was easier to teach than others because they understood more and provided her with feedback. In the gifted classes, she felt that there was not as much of a need for her to act motherly because many of them had that influence at home. For this reason, she said that she kept her gifted class more focused on academics. Upon being prompted about academic ability, Mrs. Cleaver described her gifted class as the upper twenty-five percent of the students. She described the students in this class as being likely to complete post-secondary education and likely to have a career and family.

Mrs. Cleaver described the non-gifted class as needing more assistance with procedures. There was more of a problem with the students being able to keep up with materials and supplies than in the gifted class. Mrs. Cleaver said she felt more connected to the non-gifted students because she was needed more than in a gifted class. This connection was because she thought that the students in the non-gifted class did not have as much support at home and needed someone to care about them. When asked about academic ability, Mrs. Cleaver stated that the range in her non-gifted class was much greater than in her gifted class. Some of the students, she claimed, could produce comparable products to the gifted students, while others struggled to make scores in the fifties. When asked about trajectories, Mrs. Cleaver claimed that some in this class would be likely to stay local, working at McDonald's, and living in government housing.

Description of Participant's Gifted Class

The gifted class being observed was comprised of 21 students, 10 males and 11 females. Of the male students, 8 were white and 2 were African American. Of the female students, there were 6 white, 4 African American, and 1 Asian-Pacific Islander students. In total, there were 14 white, 6 African American, and 1 Asian-Pacific Islander students, as shown in Figure 1. To be in the gifted class, the students had to undergo and pass the county's gifted testing at some point. Pleasantville County Schools used a variety of tests to consider the students for gifted, and the students needed to pass three of the four criteria to be accepted. The criteria included the following: creativity, motivation, achievement, and mental ability. The students were considered to be gifted in all areas if they were able to pass the gifted testing and were only considered to be removed if each of their eight-week grades were below an 80 for more than a year straight in a particular subject matter.

The gifted class was Mrs. Cleaver's first class and also her homeroom; they were in assigned seats for the duration of her class. The class was seventy minutes long and began at 8 A.M. The gifted students had all the same academic classes together, so the students followed each other throughout the day. The only exception to this was during their connections classes such as art and physical education, where the students were mixed in with others from throughout their grade level.

Description of Participant's Non-Gifted Class

The non-gifted class being observed was comprised of 19 students, 11 males and eight females. Of the male students, there were seven white, three African American, and one Hispanic students. Of the female students, there were five white, two African American, and one Asian-Pacific Islander students. In total, there were 12 white, five African American, one Asian-

Pacific Islander, and one Hispanic students, as shown in Figure 2. Students in this class were randomly assigned to be in the class and may or may not have had any other classes together. No student in this class qualified for gifted or special education services. The class was Mrs. Cleaver's second class of the day and was also seventy minutes in duration. Mrs. Cleaver assigned the non-gifted students seats, as well.

	Total Number of Students	Total Students by Gender	Total Students by Race
Gifted	21	10 males 11 females	14 white 6 African American 1 Asian-Pacific Islander
Regular Education	19	11 males 8 females	12 white 5 African American 1 Asian-Pacific Islander 1 Hispanic

Figure 2. Description of the Classes by Gender and Race

Timeline and Procedures

The timeline set for this study was eleven weeks from the first interview to the last. Data collection began in February 2016 and ended in April 2016. I was present in the classroom every other week, with observations two days each week. For the study, there were ten days of observations planned, and each day consisted of two seventy-minute classes. In ascertaining how many days to observe, I considered a pilot study I conducted in the spring before conducting this study. I received a saturation of critical incidents with eight observations. After eight observations, I did not record any new types of interactions that had not previously been recorded. Nevertheless, I settled on the rather arbitrary number of ten observations to account for any sort of issues I may have incurred during one or two of the observations. It is my opinion that there is no set number of observations that would yield the perfect amount of data.

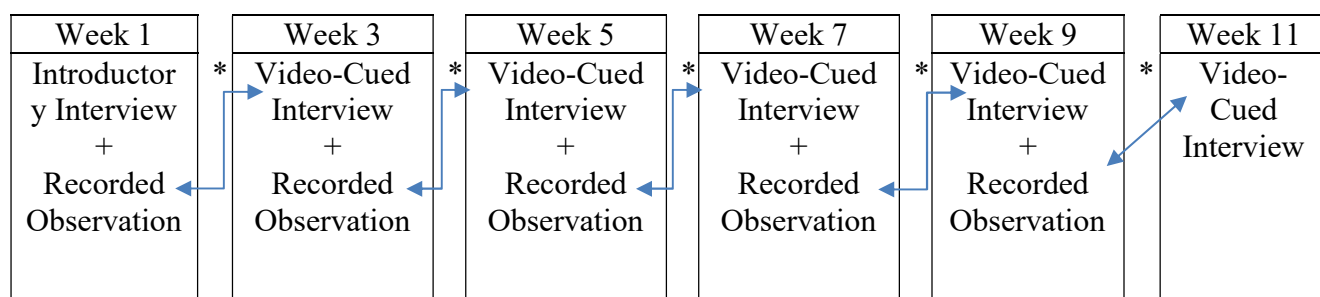
Certainly, there are always possibilities of uncovering more data by increasing the number of observations, yet an increase in the number of observations can also increase the burden on the participant (Stake, 1995). In addition, given the specific scope of the study and criteria constituting a critical incident, defined in detail in the video-cued interview section, such incidents can occur multiple times in any given observation.

Data Collection

Case studies in the field of education use data collection techniques used by other disciplines (Merriam, 1998). For this study, I examined how a teacher interacted with her students based on how she perceived their ability levels using sociological traditions. I employed three data collection methods to inform my study: (1) semi-structured interviews to learn about the teacher and her thoughts on tracking; (2) video-cued interviews to gain insight into the teacher's decision-making process as well as gain understanding of how the classrooms function; and (3) direct observations, field notes, and the raw video data from observations in the classroom.

I began the study with an introductory interview to get to know the participant in the context of the study. Following the initial interview, I observed the teacher's classes every other week and conducted a video-cued interview using video footage from the previous week's data, as shown in Figure 3. I repeated the cycle for a total of five video-cued interviews, finishing the study over the course of eleven weeks. The purpose of spacing out the observations and interviews was twofold. First, spacing out the study allowed me to capture what Davis (2003) referred to as the "discontinuity of the transition and the sharp changes in status that occur as a result" of transitioning to middle school from elementary school (p. 216). The students changed from elementary school over the course of their first year in middle school and spacing the

interviews aided in accounting for such changes. Second, the classroom dynamics could have changed as the teacher assessed the students and learned about the classes (Hatt, 2012; Shepard, 2000).



*Selected video footage was prepared during the weeks I was present in the classroom for the following round of video-cued interviews.

Figure 3. Timeline of Classroom Observations and Interviews

Semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews are prepared in advance with a set of questions to guide the interview on a certain trajectory (Roulston, 2010), but still have somewhat of a conversational tone. The introductory, or first interview in this study, utilized the assistance of an interview guide that provided a basic framework for the conversation. However, being responsive to the participant and generating useful data for the interview was just as important in the event that the questions took the respondent in a different direction. Roulston also suggested the possibility of not receiving satisfactory information, and advocated the use of probing questions to gain more insight when needed. Probes were built into the interview guide and were utilized when the participant did not give enough depth when first prompted with the questions. Otherwise, I allowed the participant to guide the interview. As Patton (2002) offered, the general interview guide approach helps to “build a conversation within a particular subject...and to establish a conversational style but with the focus on a particular subject” (p. 343). The interview guide approach to the introductory interview seemed appropriate for

covering the participant's background information and her beliefs about tracking (see Appendix C for the introductory interview guide). This approach afforded me the opportunity to get to know the participant in a low-stakes manner while still obtaining the information needed for my study.

The purpose of the semi-structured introductory interview was to obtain information about the teacher's background as well as her beliefs and feelings about tracking. The interview lasted a little over 45 minutes, and questions focused on the following topics about the participant's: education, teaching experience, and perceptions regarding tracking. Regarding the participant's education, I asked questions regarding both her college education as well as questions regarding which track level she was identified as in her matriculation through the school system. The teaching experience questions focused on both her personal history teaching both gifted and non-gifted students as well as how she became gifted certified and her experiences with gifted education. The questions regarding her perceptions of the tracking system prompted her to give her opinions on tracking, ability level, success, and preferences regarding teaching assignments. These questions helped to provide a description of the teacher and how she viewed her education and experiences in order to contextualize the participant within the study.

Video-cued interviews. Select video footage from the observations served as the prompts in the follow-up interviews. The footage selected was determined based on the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954). The critique incident technique provided me with a way to assess specific behaviors that were observed in the video footage. A critical incident, Flanagan (1954) asserted, is meant to include "any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act" (p.

327). The purpose of my study was to understand what a teacher's perceptions of her students looked like in practice based on track level and the critical incidents needed to be focused on informing just this. Specifically, the criteria for a critical incident in my study was grounded in the differences in the pedagogical decisions between the classes based on the track level such as differences in instructions, support given, the products expected, or classroom management styles. The aforementioned list was not all-inclusive, but each of the pedagogical decisions are listed due to their clearly observable nature in a classroom. The recorded behaviors were sufficient to allow inferences regarding the participant's decision-making and were made more concrete with the participant's input in the video-cued interview process.

The video clips were also selected based on their ability to generate discussion surrounding the research questions. Raingruber (2003) contended that "the immediate nature of the videotape captures emotion, nuances, climates of meaning, embodied perceptions, spatial influences, relational understandings, situational factors, and temporal manifestations of a person's life world in addition to verbalized comments" (p. 1156). Raingruber's examples show how video data can add many layers of meaning to the data collected and make it much more valuable than field notes alone. Some of the added aspects of interaction that are captured in the video data manifest in the tone, facial expressions, and in the participant's body language. Furthermore, Tobin (1988) suggested other important reasons for including video-cued interviews in his study, which include deconstructing the traditional power dynamic in the research, providing the participant with a voice in the research, and justifying and providing meaning to what occurs during the observations. In an effort to situate myself alongside Tobin's belief for deconstructing the power dynamic in the research process, the questions were open-ended to provide the participant with as much control of the interview as she was willing to take.

Even though I chose the video clips she reviewed in the video-cued interview, the participant was the one who explained each of the situations. Another reason for utilizing the video-cued interview protocol was to bring up topics that would have been uncomfortable to discuss directly. Using the video-cued interview protocol allowed for the video clips to speak for themselves and without the seeming judgment of the researcher queuing the participant to recall a specific event.

The semi-structured interview approach mentioned previously was used for each of the video-cued interviews. The interview guide only provided basic questions regarding the video footage and allowed for the participant to give her account of each incident (see Appendix D for the video-cued interview guide). In the first, second, and fourth interviews there were seven critical incidents that were reviewed by the participant. In the third and fifth interviews there were four incidents reviewed. The interviews lasted between 38 and 97 minutes, with the majority of them lasting about one hour. The topics of the interviews ranged from discussions of warm-up questions, directions for activities, direct instruction methods, explanations for how to solve problems, and classroom management techniques.

Direct observations/field notes/raw video data. Observing the teacher's practice served as another important source of data. Patton (2002) proposed that observations give the researcher a "chance to learn things that people would be unwilling to talk about in an interview" (p. 263). For this study, the focus of my observations centered on the interactions between the teacher and her students as well as how the teacher communicated through direct instruction, delivery of content, and classroom management techniques. Observations took place in both a gifted and a non-gifted class. I was strictly an observer in the classroom and did not interact with the students throughout the study. I chose not to interact with the students directly because I did

not want to influence the classroom with more than my presence and the presence of the audio/visual equipment. Both video and audio recording occurred during the observations, and I made field note entries to collect data necessary to compare the types of interactions I observed in the classroom.

Field notes are another important source of data used to provide information regarding the research setting and what happened during the observations (Patton, 2002). Despite the audio and video recording during observations, taking detailed field notes was still important as a means to record my feelings as an observer (Patton, 2002). The purpose of my study was to record an account of what occurred in the classroom, and field notes helped me in this process. The field notes I took included procedures that may have not been in the frame, interactions I observed between the teacher and the class, and follow-up questions for the participant for the next round of interviews. Field notes also served as a marker for the video data in order to quickly access incidents I judged to be critical during the observation.

In addition to field notes, I also used the raw video data to provide data about the setting and any possible changes to the setting between classes or observations. The video footage provided rich data about the classroom and was just as meaningful as the written description of the classroom in the field notes. In addition to providing data on the setting, video footage captured multiple interactions at once and had the capability to record incidents that may or may not be recorded in the field notes. It was also easier to use the raw video data for more complex interactions between the teacher and the whole class because it could pick up multiple people speaking simultaneously. The raw video data consisted of the footage taken of the entire class, with each class being 70 minutes long.

Data Trustworthiness

Validity of qualitative data is not tested in the same manner as quantitative data is, and because of this, there is a need to establish data trustworthiness in a different way. There are many ways in which a qualitative researcher establishes data trustworthiness. In my study, I used data triangulation, a pilot study conducted with a peer, and member checks to do so. In the following section, I outline the process for each of the methods employed to ensure my data was trustworthy.

Data triangulation. Each method of data collection has limitations and shortcomings that could bring up questions regarding internal validity of results (Denzin, 1978). In an effort to minimize the flaws of a specific method, I combined multiple methods of data collection to achieve what Denzin proposed to be “the best of each [method] while overcoming their unique deficiencies” (p. 302). Using multiple methods of data collection that complement each other and work to strengthen the study is a process known as triangulation. When triangulating data, it is important that each of the methods maintain relevance and provide support for the theoretical and methodological choices of the study. Merriam (1998) echoed Denzin in support of triangulating data from disparate methods, noting that “especially in terms of using multiple methods of data collection and analysis, triangulation strengthens reliability as well as internal validity” (p. 207).

In an effort to increase internal validity in this study and provide what Merriam (1998) characterized as a “rich, thick description” of the study, I employed multiple methods of data collection (p. 38). When conducting interviews, the validity of the data was only as good as the interviewer’s questions and the participant being interviewed (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). My interviews were based on the observations and video-recorded interactions between the teacher

and her student. This data afforded me an opportunity to bring up topics that may otherwise have been omitted because critiquing someone's teaching practice may appear to be confrontational. The data obtained in the observations shed light on how tracked classes are taught and helped to guide my choices for what constituted a critical incident. Employing the video-cued interviews as a method was not only an essential piece of the research design to gather data but also an effort to ensure validity through triangulation.

Perhaps most importantly, using the video footage was beneficial in giving the participant a chance to reflect on her experiences from her practice (Raingruber, 2003). The video-cued interviews also provided explanations for the interactions she may not have otherwise brought up in an interview. From the standpoint of researcher bias, the video segments provided possibilities for the participant to construct narratives that accompanied the observed behavior. In effect, video prompts shifted some of the interpretive burden from the researcher and toward the participant. The methods used in the study complement each other, each highlighting different aspects of the case and contributing to the coherence and validity of the study.

Pilot study. In the spring before my dissertation study, I conducted a pilot study to test out my data collection methods. I chose to use a colleague and fellow graduate student who fit all of the criteria previously described in the *Selection of Research Participant* section as a participant. I conducted the study using the same procedures that I used with this study, with only two differences: there were only eight observations in each class instead of the ten, like were used in my dissertation study; and after each interview phase of study, I sat down with my participant and asked for her feedback on how she thought the interview went and asked for suggestions on how to make it flow better. This process, which Shenton (2004) referred to as peer scrutiny, allowed me to see a "fresh perspective" and gain insight in to the assumptions built

in to the study (p. 67). This process also gave me chance to “refine [my] methods, [and] develop a greater explanation of the research design” (p. 67).

Member checks. A member check is a way to increase the credibility of the research by having the participant confirm the accuracy of the data collected. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stressed the importance of member checks in qualitative studies as “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). Throughout this study, I used member checks to verify the accuracy of my raw transcript data. I transcribed each of the video-cued interviews after each phase and dropped a copy of the transcript off with my participant. She signed off on them and returned them when she could verify the accuracy of each interview. I received the approval of my participant on each of the interviews without any reservations.

Data Analysis

In analyzing the data, I used what Butler-Kisber (2010) referred to as the *constant-comparison* method. Merriam (1998) stated that “the basic strategy of the method is to do what its name implies—constantly compare. The researcher begins with a particular incident and compares it with another incident in the same set or in another set” (p. 159). The constant-comparison method is an approach to analysis where the focus is on the data and not on a pre-existing theory the researcher attempts to fit the data within. In order to successfully use the constant-comparison method, I provided an accurate description of the school, the teacher, and each of the two classes observed for the study. Without an accurate and in-depth description of each of these, the comparison between the classes in the analysis phase would be superficial. Due to the idea that the theory comes from the data itself, Glaser and Strauss (1967) referred to the aforementioned approach as the *grounded theory approach* to data analysis because the theory is

grounded in the data. However, this does not mean that the data are not being interpreted through a specific viewpoint. Butler-Kisber (2010) insisted that one of the aims of the constant-comparison approach “is to construct a plausible and persuasive explanation of what is transpiring from the emergent themes, recognizing again that all explanations are partial by nature, and there are multiple ways that experiences and/or phenomena can be explained” (p. 31). The constant-comparison approach complemented symbolic interactionism while considering both approach experiences as partial and subjective based on several factors. Symbolic interactionism also provided guidance in how I sought to create the most plausible explanation of what was occurring in this study. Blumer (1986) stated that the third premise of symbolic interactionism is that “...meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things [s]he encounters” (p. 2). Using this premise as guidance, the data examined in this study was the participant’s explanations of her teaching in tracked classes. It allowed for her to interpret the meanings behind her actions in each class. In addition, using case study research as the methodological design for this study afforded me the opportunity to showcase the context of the case to understand the way the participant interacted with her students. Each of these pieces of this study worked together towards a common goal, which was to understand how a teacher’s perception of her students compared based on track level.

I began my analysis by examining the initial interview to get to know the participant as well as find valuable information from the beliefs portion of the interview. The purpose behind this step was to gain insight in to what tracking meant to her so that I could understand her actions more. This is based on Blumer’s (1986) first premise of symbolic interactionism, “human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them” (p.

2). I also analyzed each classroom observation separately from each other during each round of observations to find patterns of interactions within the classroom. I then found video clips from each classroom that were both a) critical instances that encouraged discussion and b) representative of the classroom interactions. These video clips were then transcribed and utilized in each of the video-cued interview stages.

While the structure of the video-cued interviews was centered on the critical instances in the video clips, I also found it appropriate to recapture previous responses from the initial interview, when applicable. The process of analyzing the observation data was repeated for each of the five rounds of the video-cued interviews. The transcription and analysis of the video-cued interviews cut across the observations and video-cued interviews. The video-cued interviews were of most interest to this study because I was interested in her perceptions of the students, and it was at this stage when she was able to articulate her perceptions the most. It was in these interviews where I examined the data for instances of agency, or the ability to work against the structure of tracking. These moments needed to be what Blumer (1986) referred to as my participant “acting towards [her]self” in an effort “to make indications to [her]self of things in [her] surroundings and thus to guide [her] actions” (p. 80). In other words, they needed to be purposefully done based on presuppositions that were mentioned by my participant. One such example was the statement that Mrs. Cleaver made that “...every student can do the same assignment...” (February 22, 2016). As the themes emerged from the data, there were no such instances of agency where the participant vocalized working against the structure of tracking.

This interview protocol aligned with my research questions and afforded me the opportunity to gain insight in to the teacher’s construct of reality in her classroom. The video-cued interviews addressed the question of how track level influenced perceptions by placing

instances from both classes side-by-side. In addition, the video-cued interviews addressed how the teacher's perceptions informed her pedagogical decision-making in tracked classes by directly asking her to compare how she addressed certain instances in her classes. The protocol also afforded me with the perspective of the teacher and did not rely on my assumptions based on my observations.

I transcribed and analyzed the data separately, and examined each round of video-cued interviews separately. After this initial analysis, I cut across all of the video-cued interviews to find themes that resonated in the data as a whole. At this point, there were two ways that I found to be most beneficial to me in organizing the data by: common themes, and class type. Organizing the data in these manners allowed me to compare similar interactions in each class, and how they were executed, when applicable, but also to measure the frequency of such interactions in each class type.

The initial analysis has generated the following assumptions of students based on: track level, home life, academic behaviors and discipline, and intellect. Each of the themes was viewed in contrast to each other by the participant based on class type. The gifted students were mostly associated with positive attributes as students and children, and their home life was characterized by having involved parents. In addition, they were viewed to be well-behaved and more intellectually capable than their non-gifted peers. The regular students were associated with negative attributes and with not having supportive homes. They were also associated with negative behaviors and said to be less capable of the mathematical tasks given to them in class.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the case study research as the methodology for this study. I followed with an explanation of the timeline for the study and the methods used to gather data. I also provided an explanation of how I analyzed and tested the validity of the data for the study. In the following chapter, the findings from the data will be discussed. In chapter five, I conclude this study with a summary of my work, a discussion, and implications of my study based on my findings.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The goal of this chapter is to report the findings after conducting a single case study of a sixth-grade mathematics teacher who taught both gifted and regular students. The purpose of the study was twofold: one, to gain an understanding regarding what a teacher's perception of students looks like in practice based on track levels; and two, to examine how those perceptions influence pedagogical decisions in the classes. Observations, field notes, and video-cued interviews were used to compile the data, with a focus on the participant's perspective in the video-cued interviews towards her decision-making. I used symbolic interactionism as the lens through which I examined the participant, her interactions with her tracked students, and how her perceptions of her tracked students affected her pedagogical decisions in the classroom.

The research questions that guided this study were:

- RQ₁: How does a teacher's perceptions of groups of students she teaches compare to each other based on track level?
- RQ₂: What does teaching look like in tracked classes?
- RQ₃: Where does a teacher's perception of her class intersect with the strategies employed?

It was in the introductory interview that my participant, Mrs. Cleaver, expressed her thoughts on the tracking system. She claimed that tracked classes were:

...almost necessary in ways because some of these gifted kids...if they were held back by regular kids, it's going to only hurt them. And then some of the lower kids are only

going to get left behind if we just cater to the gifted kids. So I think in some ways it's just necessary to keep them [by] ability level (February 22, 2016).

This idea represents her assumption that tracking students was necessary for all groups of students. Moreover, her response was indicative of participants in many studies in the field who suggest that the tracking system protects the students' educational experience from one another. However, her words do not suggest that Mrs. Cleaver lacked enjoyment teaching both tracks. On the contrary, she stated that she felt more needed and connected to the students in the regular classes, despite that the gifted classes were easier and left her feeling more successful as a teacher.

In the following chapter, I provided a description of Mrs. Cleaver and outlined the four themes that emerged from the data. I used my participant's voice from both the semi-structured introductory interview and the video-cued interviews to bring her beliefs to the forefront. Within these sections, I cross-referenced her claims with my observational data when applicable. Finally, I also interwove relevant literature regarding the themes throughout the chapter to position the themes.

Mrs. Cleaver

Mrs. Cleaver is a white female who was in her mid-thirties at the time of the study. She attended grade school in the most populous county in her state and went on to attend college at a large university in the state of Georgia. Mrs. Cleaver said she knew she wanted to become a teacher from a young age because of her positive experiences as a student, and she loved working with children. She studied Family and Consumer Science in college, a major she chose because she was inspired by her Family and Consumer Science teacher in high school. She

student-taught in Family and Consumer Science for a semester at one of the neighboring middle schools in the same county she taught, and completed all requisite practicum experience. She graduated with her bachelor's degree in Family and Consumer Science Education.

Upon graduating, Mrs. Cleaver spent ten years teaching at the school where I conducted my study. She began her career teaching Family and Consumer Science before switching to math, a discipline she wanted to teach because she said it had more concrete measures of success. She also said that teaching mathematics made her feel more needed as a teacher. She did have a background in math and had become certified for math while in college to have dual certifications. This practice is typical in middle schools as teachers are encouraged to have both a primary and a secondary area of teaching. She chose math due to the fact that she always excelled in the subject and enjoyed it as a student. Nevertheless, the majority of her experience was in Family and Consumer Science, and it is possible that she taught her math classes differently because mathematics was not her primary focus. Although, the extent to this is unknown because she did have mathematics education courses in college.

After switching to mathematics, her principal requested that she become gifted certified. Mrs. Cleaver stated that she agreed to become gifted certified because it would make her more marketable. This desired advanced employable status is despite the fact that she stated she wanted to teach at her school for the duration of her career. She took pride in noting that many teachers taught at this school their entire career, and claimed that it was a testament to how good of a workplace it was as well as a community. She also lived in the community that she taught, which was a place she had resided most of her adult life.

The school that she worked during the time of the study was made-up of about 50 percent white and 40 percent African American. The demographic make-up of her classes was noted in

Figure 2 in Chapter 3, which showed that the gifted classes was 67 percent of students were white, 29 percent were African American, with the remaining percentage being made up of Asian-Pacific Islander. In the lower-track class, there was 63 percent white, 26 percent African American, with the remaining percentages being made up of Asian-Pacific Islander and Hispanic. The demographics within the school did not match the demographics of either of Mrs. Cleaver's classes, but they each of her classes had almost identical racial make-up to one another.

Mrs. Cleaver never mentioned race in the interviews, and I never observed an instance where race seemed to be a factor. The lower-track students that she spoke negatively about consisted of the same racial background as the gifted class she did not speak about in this manner. This is important to note based on the highly documented history that race has played in the tracking system (Ansalone, 2010; Bonner, 2000; Nunn, 2011).

As a participant, Mrs. Cleaver took the interviews seriously and watched the video recorded critical incidents intently. At times, she even asked to watch them repeatedly, in case she might have missed something. She did not speak about the incidents until she seemed comfortable with what had occurred in the video clips, often pausing for a minute or two to formulate what she was going to say. I did not notice any difference in how she taught after the first round of interviews. This lack of change led me to believe that the interviews did not impact how she taught the classes.

Emerged Themes

The process I used in order to allow the data to create its own meaning was labor intensive. I read through the data many times for context and understanding of the information

obtained through the video-cued interviews. I was searching for keywords or topics that seemed meaningful to the participant or were repeated multiple times. I parsed through the data, only taking out information that spoke of the classes as a whole. Comments regarding individual students were omitted because Mrs. Cleaver had access to information about the students based on conversations with the student or through parental contact. In addition, this information was also outside the scope of this study and considered sensitive information that I did not have permission to make record of for this study. This procedure rendered four themes that overlapped through multiple interviews and recurred as reasons or rationale for Mrs. Cleaver's decision-making on some level. Each of the themes described were based on the case of Mrs. Cleaver, a sixth-grade mathematics teacher who taught both gifted and regular tracked classes in a middle school in the southeastern United States. The findings in this study are particular to the participant and are based on her experiences and interactions leading up to the study as well as during the study.

The initial theme I discussed first came to light in the semi-structured introductory interview when she attempted to make sense of her students' willingness to work hard based on their track level. Then, I examined the assumptions that Mrs. Cleaver made in regard to the students' home lives. I followed this with her rendering of the behaviors and discipline of the tracked students. Lastly, I examined Mrs. Cleaver's assumptions regarding the intellect of the tracked students.

Assumptions Regarding Students' Willingness to Work Hard

Gifted students. My first theme is associated with the idea that Mrs. Cleaver made assumptions regarding the students' willingness to work hard based on the track level for which they belonged. This theme emerged very early in the process as Mrs. Cleaver began to describe the

differences between the gifted and regular students using examples from both within her classroom and outside the scope of her classroom to describe them as students and as children. Broad assumptions of students based on track level can have lasting effects on the students, which can impede their learning (Rist, 1970). In the introductory interview, Mrs. Cleaver's responses turned from the idea that ability level was innate, toward broad assumptions that ability levels were associated with hard work, the amount of effort a student puts into the class, and parental involvement. When prompted about the future endeavors of her students, Mrs. Cleaver's response was strikingly different based on the classes' track level. Specifically, Mrs. Cleaver stated the following:

I see some of them going to college and attaining a career and having a family. I do, unfortunately, see some of them around here in the same neighborhoods they are in, involved in some of the negative things that their brothers and sisters are involved in... When thinking about it, most of my gifted class I see as the first thing I said, [which is] going to college and if not college then technical school or doing some sort of post-secondary education. And then with my other class, I do have some in there that will still be around here working in McDonald's, living in government housing, and not being as successful as the others (February 22, 2016).

Mrs. Cleaver defined success by reaching post-secondary schooling and having a family. She viewed the gifted students as more successful and having a greater prospect of obtaining some sort of further educational achievement. While she did clarify that not all regular students would end up working at McDonald's or living in government housing by using the word "some," it was the only way in which she characterized this class. Other researchers have also reaffirmed that lower-track students were less likely to be considered successful (Oakes, 1985), and that

their teachers focused more on deficits (Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004). These findings seemed to be in keeping with Mrs. Cleaver's comments regarding her students that students in higher-tracked classes had higher educational aspirations (Oakes, 1985), and their teachers believed they were more likely to go to college (Kelly & Carbonaro, 2012).

There are possible consequences by making assumptions regarding students' future levels of success. In Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) classic study regarding self-fulfilling prophecies, the authors asserted that "when we are led to expect that we are about to meet a pleasant person, our treatment of him at first meeting may, in fact, make him a more pleasant person" (p. viii). The researchers applied this idea to the classroom and administered what they called an intellectual growth predictor test to a few classes of students. At random, they chose twenty percent of the students and told their teachers that they had the highest growth. They found that these students thrived when their teachers had high expectations for the students. Even students whose teachers previously labeled them as regular or slow learners made larger gains when the researchers told the teachers that they had scored well on the test. It was possible that Mrs. Cleaver also created a self-fulfilling prophecy about her high expectations of the gifted students and lower expectations of the lower-tracked classes. It is important to mention that during my observations, Mrs. Cleaver never conducted herself in a manner that openly showcased her belief that the regular students were less likely to be successful. Her professional manner and tone transcended both classes. However, the differences in her perceptions of the students and how she felt about them were brought to the forefront in the interviews.

Mrs. Cleaver's prediction regarding the gifted students' futures was not an isolated incident. Throughout the study, she continuously made comments regarding traits of gifted students that reinforced these beliefs or may have even led her to this conclusion. She used words such as

drive, ambition, accountability, and competitive to describe the gifted students as a whole. Similar comments were used to explain how she held the gifted students in high regard. One of the words that Mrs. Cleaver frequently used to describe the gifted students was the word “drive” or “driven.” This term was used to describe gifted students in four of the five video-cued interviews. She used this term to reference why she believed gifted students acted in a manner that differed from that of the regular students. In one particular instance, Mrs. Cleaver used the term “drive” to explain a higher set of expectations the students held for themselves:

[They have] their own ambition and their own drive of what their expectations are for themselves...along with their willingness for wanting to do well. They understand that and have the innate knowledge too, that a lot of what we are going over, they knew (March 28, 2016).

In the previous example, Mrs. Cleaver used the ideas of ambition and drive as reasons for why she believed the gifted students would study more for a test than the regular students. She also used the term “driven” to explain behavior in the gifted students. In one interview, Mrs. Cleaver blatantly claimed that the gifted students “just have more drive...than the regular students” (April 1, 2016). This echoed Oakes’ (1985) conclusion that teachers of high-track classes emphasized more positive attributes in their students than other teachers. Other researchers found that treating gifted students in this manner gave them more of an advantage than their peers (Donaldson, LeChasseur, & Mayer, 2016; Nespor, 1985; Oakes, 1990; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). The advantage for the gifted students came not only in the form of better treatment, but also in the higher set of expectations that went along with the belief in their positive attributes.

In an indirect reference to the “drive” described previously, Mrs. Cleaver described how the gifted students were better at individual work:

I think the gifted students are a little bit more...not better, but more practiced at individual work. They know how to work individually better. So, me just giving [the assignment] to them and having them work, I think they would be fine (April 14, 2016).

She mentioned how the gifted students had more practice with individual work and went on to say that they did not need to work with partners or in groups as much because they knew how to work by themselves better and more efficiently. Mrs. Cleaver also indirectly referenced the “drive” of gifted students when she mentioned how they wanted A’s because they were competitive and did not accept failure.

Another aspect of gifted children that Mrs. Cleaver referenced was the need for them to be challenged. All too often in my teaching career, I have heard the phrase “they can handle it” when referring to gifted students. I have witnessed gifted teachers use this phrase as support for why they differentiated an assignment and gave the lower-track a less-complex lesson. However, I have also heard it used to support behavioral incentives, classroom-specific privileges, and even the use of film in the classroom. Mrs. Cleaver used this phrase during my study, but she was not the first teacher I have heard use it in conjunction with gifted students. She used the phrase “they can handle it” as a way to explain why she went into more depth with a lesson with the gifted students, which was noted in more than one observation. Also, she used the phrase to reference the need to challenge the students more than the other classes:

Them being gifted, I kind of took it a step further because I think they can handle it. And kind of having them think about what they just did and taking it a step further and explaining it (March 28, 2016).

In the previous quote, Mrs. Cleaver described why she took the time in class to discuss which mathematical terms were difficult to describe in a vocabulary activity and why the students thought the activity was difficult to describe. She continued her rationale and stated that the gifted students were more analytical with their answers than the regular students and used this as reasoning for the activity, which was omitted in the regular class. In my experience as an observer in the classroom, the gifted students' answers in their discussion were not as analytical as Mrs. Cleaver described, but instead focused primarily on the definitions that she had given them during a previous class period. When I reviewed the raw video footage, the students recited the provided definitions while only a few of them put the definitions in their own words. On a whole, the debriefing of the vocabulary activity was nothing more than a regurgitation of the definitions. Even more, Mrs. Cleaver claimed that the regular students were capable enough to complete a similar activity but that she wanted them to do a different assignment because they did not have good time-management skills. This instance was another example of how the gifted students were given more opportunities in the classroom that the regular students were not provided.

Mrs. Cleaver also claimed that gifted students did not value questions that they deemed to be too easy because they needed to be challenged more. When prompted with the question of what caused the differences between the classes in this regard, she responded:

Maybe the gifted kids...if they have been tracked this whole time, our mentality is, either you have got it or you don't. You have got to show us what you know. We move...we don't move faster but...we challenge them a little bit more and kind of just, you've got it. I'm not going to sit here and baby you and explain it over and over and they understand that (March 8, 2016).

The expectation that she was only going to explain each topic once before moving on to another topic was exclusive to the gifted classes. The pace and level of activities were differentiated based on what she perceived to be appropriate for the track level. Oakes (1990) also found that teachers in the higher tracked classes gave more challenging work, worked at a faster pace, and incorporated a greater variety of activities. Perhaps Mrs. Cleaver taught the gifted class in this manner because she believed that the gifted students were not afraid to push themselves. Mrs. Cleaver did not verbally give a reason as to why the gifted students needed to be challenged more than their peers, and I did not ask her to give a reason why. In my observation of the classes, she did in fact teach the classes different in this regard. She operated her gifted class in a manner that showcased her belief that the gifted students came with a background knowledge that the regular students did not. In reviewing the video data, she did not spend as much time repeating herself or explaining fundamental concepts as she did in the lower-tracked class. In a later interview, she attributed some of this to the idea that they enjoyed her class and even enjoyed being challenged more than the regular students.

Mrs. Cleaver's account of the gifted students referenced many positive attributes she ascribed to them as a whole. Research has documented that holding high expectations of students leads to more success (Oakes, 1985; Rist, 1970; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). This placed the gifted students at an advantage as Mrs. Cleaver continuously referenced the positive attributes of the students, which had an effect on her high expectations. Similarly, Mrs. Cleaver referenced the regular students as a whole group when describing them as children or students. In fact, she often described the regular students in direct comparison to the gifted students. Unfortunately, her comments regarding the regular students often set up a dichotomous

relationship between the gifted and regular students, ascribing negative traits to the regular students more often than not.

Lower-tracked students/regular students. Mrs. Cleaver's comments about the regular students, largely, stood in stark contrast to her comments about the gifted students. While the gifted students were described with positive attributes, the regular students were characterized negatively in many cases. Wilcox (2015) studied tracked students' experiences with writing assignments and found that lower-tracked students were often perceived similarly. She concluded that low expectations held by their teachers left the students without information they needed to be successful. Caughlan and Kelly (2004) also warned that "being in low-tracked classrooms disenfranchises students, leading, in turn, to a lower probability of moving into more academic courses and of pursuing further education" (p. 23). A few examples Mrs. Cleaver made regarding the regular students were that they had a lack of skills in mathematics, motivation, and organizational skills. Most strikingly, regular students were frequently described as having an overreliance on the teacher and that they did not want to work hard and do well on their own.

There were a few instances over the course of the study where Mrs. Cleaver made references to a perceived overreliance on her by the regular students. On a few occasions, she addressed this with her students while giving directions to them. It was in these moments where she told them that it was not her work but their work. She assured them that they were able to ask questions, but that she was not willing to do the work for them. As made clear by the following quote, these conversations were consciously made in the regular class:

There was a part where with the regular kids, I made it very obvious that I am not doing this for them. It was more, they needed to do this themselves and I was just reiterating

that this is not Mrs. Cleaver's project, this is their project. They needed to get their data; they needed to not ask me so many questions. [I was] just kind of going over those boundaries. I'm not going to do the project for them (March 8, 2016).

Mrs. Cleaver did not seem to blame the students for their reliance on her. In fact, she said it was possibly her fault that the regular students relied on her more than their gifted peers. On multiple occasions, she claimed that the regular students lacked confidence in math and—in one instance—suggested that she “trained” them to rely on her more. The existing literature supported these notions as well. Ansalone (2010) reported that lower-tracked students were more limited in their access to the work that students considered interesting as well as in their opportunities to work independently. Unfortunately, his findings were nothing new in the field of tracking. Oakes (1990) also reported similar findings two decades before Ansalone's study. In her work, she claimed that students who were judged to be of lower ability got fewer opportunities because the teacher did not feel they deserved or warranted as much as their peers who were judged to be of higher ability. The teacher's perceptions of her students as incapable led them to become less capable due to the less challenging work and fewer opportunities to work on the material on their own. In my observation, this was a problem that Mrs. Cleaver faced in her regular class as she seemed to enable them to be reliant on her during other activities. For instance, she frequently gave them answers to questions she posed without much time to think about the questions. During other observations, she also gave unsolicited help to students she perceived to be struggling, which did not occur in her gifted class. Despite the revelation that she possibly caused the problem she was upset about, it did not stop her from trying to contest such behavior:

Some of them think that I am a teacher and I am supposed to be there to teach them at all times. I have actually been told that by them...that, 'you are my teacher though, why can't you help me?' I am a teacher; I am not a helper all the time. If I teach you what to do, you do it, and actually those same kids have told me that I'm a teacher and I need to help them at all times (March 8, 2016).

Regardless of who she blamed, it was evident that Mrs. Cleaver believed the regular students were over reliant on her.

While seemingly contradictory in manner, Mrs. Cleaver went from describing the over-reliant students who constantly inundated her with questions to describing them as students who did not care about their work or their grades. It was possible that her low expectations of these students fueled this belief and that it was a way to absolve her from their lack of success. Similarly, Harris (2012) found that many lower-track teachers had low expectations of their students and blamed them for their lack of progress. By doing this, Harris believed that the participants avoided responsibility for their pupils' lack of progress. Nespor (1985) also declared that when teachers believed that a student's characteristics were not subject to change, they were more likely to create a class with easier work. This creates a cycle of uninteresting material for students who are less capable of completing the work due to their experiences as a lower track student.

She went on to imply that the regular students' parents were actually sympathetic to their children's plight and gave them justification for their lack of knowledge in mathematics:

They just, honestly...a lot of them don't care. I mean, their grades don't matter; they have fifties and sixties in my class. It is not valued by them, it is just...they are fixing their hair, they are worrying about what practice they are having that night. They *ain't*

[sic] got time for math. Or their parents at home are saying ‘I never understood math, so you probably didn’t get it from me either’ like you don’t understand it and I don’t understand it either. It is an inherited stupid-ness [sic] (April 14, 2016).

Mrs. Cleaver’s comment spoke volumes about her perceptions of the regular students and the types of conversations that she believed were occurring with her students and their parents. It also showed a connection that she made between her perception of the regular students and their parents’ mathematical abilities. In similar comments, she stated the students were not fluent with math. In another example, Mrs. Cleaver claimed that:

They don’t get [decimals], they just think ‘oh, this is just another standard; I’m not going to pay attention.’ I don’t think it reaches them that math is not just here to trick you and be annoying to you and for you not to enjoy (April 14, 2016).

In this quote, Mrs. Cleaver claimed that the regular students did not understand the topic and that she thought the students believed they did not have to pay attention. She also stated that the regular students found her subject both annoying and unenjoyable. This was quite a contrast from her perception of the gifted students, whom she said enjoyed both math and being challenged by her work. Mrs. Cleaver did not make similar comments regarding the regular students, and her negative comments suggested she did not have much faith in their willingness to work hard.

In another comparison, Mrs. Cleaver became upset with the regular students’ test results when compared to the gifted student’s results. In this instance, the blame was placed on the regular students:

I was just infuriated because the way I teach, I teach the same to both, and it just bothers me that they [the regular students] didn’t get it, and it wasn’t the fact that they didn’t

understand it. They didn't...it is not the fact that I didn't give it to them. It was the fact that they didn't try, and they didn't take it for real (April 14, 2016).

In this example, Mrs. Cleaver believed that the regular students did not put enough effort into the test. This example works in conjunction with the previous statements, as it displays a negative connotation associated with the regular students. In addition, she ascribed negative traits to the regular students as a way to justify their unsatisfactory results. It was troubling that Mrs. Cleaver's response was to blame her students, but it was possible that her anger indicated that she had higher expectations of them than their performance reflected. However, this was not observed in any of the classes or mentioned in the interviews as a reason for her anger when the regular students did not perform well. Also missing from this conversation was her previous comments about how the regular students were over-reliant on her as a teacher or the idea that they had been trained to be given the information. There did not seem to be any reflection on these ideas at the time she expressed her disappointment in the regular students.

Home Life

The second theme I examined was associated with the connections my participant made between the students' track levels and what she believed to be aspects of their home life. This theme included assumptions regarding students' socio-economic status, parental involvement, and expectations parents held for their children. However, I was not only concerned with the assumptions she made about their home life, but I was also concerned at how the assumptions affected her teaching in the tracked classrooms. This theme first emerged in the introductory interview when Mrs. Cleaver made the following statement:

As [I said] before, I am very motherly. In my gifted [class], there are some [students] that need me that way. But I do believe for the most part, most of them have very parent-

involved homes, whereas the non-gifted, which sounds very discriminating, but a lot of them don't. ...I feel like they need somebody to care about them and ask them how their day was more than the gifted does because they are going to get it when they get home. So I keep gifted, almost in a way, more education based and the non-gifted almost ends up more relationship based in ways (February 22, 2016).

This claim that Mrs. Cleaver made had multiple levels of analysis but provided a good example of what typified this theme. First, there is a considerable amount of research showcasing that non-gifted students disproportionately have less affluent neighborhoods and homes than their gifted peers (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Rist, 1970; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). The amount of time parents of lower-tracked students had to spend with their children due to non-traditional work schedules differs based on track level. However, a constrained time schedule did not mean the parents were less involved with their children when they were able to spend time with them. Mrs. Cleaver allowed her assumptions about her students' home lives to guide how she taught her classes, with a focus on academics in the gifted class and a focus on relationships or emotional support in the regular class. The regular education students were still held to the same standard at the end of the school year despite less of an emphasis on the curriculum. Similar comments were made at different points in the study that come together to tell a story of what Mrs. Cleaver perceived to be very different home experiences based on track level. On a whole, Mrs. Cleaver made fewer claims about the gifted students' home life than the regular students. However, the claims that she made were telling of her perceptions of how and under what conditions the gifted students were raised. Across multiple interviews, Mrs. Cleaver claimed that the gifted students generally came from a household with more involved parents and a better

“home background.” Similarly, she also stated that parental involvement directly related to hard work in school.

In one interview, Mrs. Cleaver stated that gifted students expected more of themselves. When probed to further investigate why she thought this was, she claimed that the gifted students’ parents had high expectations of their children:

[Gifted students] have been expected to correct work and expected to perform at the best of their ability, and they have just had to continue to reach a certain level. So, I think now it is just in them to do that, where their parents might expect them [to] at home. I know some of them, if they go home with anything less than a ‘B’ it is horrible or an ‘A’ much less (April 14, 2016).

She made the assumption that the expectations were set high for gifted students at home and that this trickled into the classroom, and this, she concluded, was why they had increased expectations for themselves. It was possible that Mrs. Cleaver’s claim was true, but the importance of the quote resided in the assumption being made about the parents based on the track level. It was also the type of assumption that did not appear when discussing the regular students’ parents.

She further interpreted her perception of gifted students’ home life to include what the students understood about work ethic and how to be successful. Leading up to the following quote, Mrs. Cleaver claimed that gifted students did more individual work than the regular students. When asked to elaborate as to why she believed this was true, she responded:

Honestly, probably a lot of what their parents tell them. What they hear in the news or whatever, all this stuff about teachers and...teachers are expected to do this, teachers are expected to do that. I think that gifted students understand that [and] have seen their

parents' work pay off and they kind of see that if they follow that route, they will probably be successful (April 14, 2016).

Mrs. Cleaver claimed that the students understood how hard both the gifted students' teachers and their own parents worked to achieve success. In this quote, there was an underlying assumption about the level of success or work obtained by the gifted students' parents. Once again, it was possible that this was true about the entire group of parents, but it was an unfounded assumption.

Mrs. Cleaver did not reserve her unfounded assumptions exclusively to the gifted students. When referring to groups of regular-education students, Mrs. Cleaver also admitted that her claims were not based on personal knowledge of the students but, instead, were based on experiences with working with lower-track students. She stated that education was not valued in the homes of the regular students. She referred to "some" of the regular students as being relieved to be at school because they did not have to worry about "issues" that plagued them at home. While she said that many of these students came to school to "play," she also focused on her perception that at least the regular students felt safe and were taken care of in school. These assumptions Mrs. Cleaver made were never substantiated by claims of knowledge regarding specific home situations and were only made in reference to the regular students. When asked if she believed there were similar situations in her gifted class, she responded "No."

Of note was that Mrs. Cleaver's comments regarding the regular students' home lives were consistent with the existing literature (Harris, 2012; Oakes, 1985; Worthy, 2010). For example, Worthy's (2010) study of middle school Language Arts classes also determined that tracking was an influential factor in teacher's perceptions of their students. In her research, she found that the lower-track "teachers talked openly about students' negative home lives and

characteristics, which were assumed to be the basis of their learning and motivation problems” (p. 274). Both Worthy’s participants and this study’s participant stressed negative home lives as one reason for the lack of success in the lower-track students. All of this, however, was based on assumptions the teachers made about their students and not factual information. In Caughlan and Kelly’s (2004) case study of a high school literature teacher, the researchers found that their participant also emphasized their lower-tracked students’ home lives as a reason for their lack of success. They also claimed that lower-track students did not have families who engaged them in their homework and topics regarding their future, while the opposite was true of their higher-tracked peers. The assumptions that teachers made about their students’ home lives affected the teachers’ perceptions of their students’ abilities (Harris, 2012). This was despite how extremely difficult it was to determine the contribution of home life on a student’s ability by the time they are in middle school (Caughlan & Kelly, 2004).

In a stark contrast to the sweeping assumptions made about the gifted students’ parents’ success, Mrs. Cleaver gave a tempered comment regarding the regular students’ parents:

...the regular students, some of them, not all of them, some of them do not really have that type of leadership in their life to show them that they have got to work to do.

Everything is not going to be handed to them; it is not going to be a teacher that answers every single beck and call. There is not going to be multiplication tables on the wall; they are going to have to do it themselves and not expect the easy way (April 14, 2016).

As previously noted regarding one of Mrs. Cleaver’s comments concerning the future expectations of her regular students, this comment regarding her regular students was not generalized to all of the students but only “some.” Nonetheless, this quote was still important because it was one of the most powerful characterizations of the regular students’ parents given

by my participant throughout the study. In the quote, Mrs. Cleaver claimed that many of the regular students did not see the same type of leadership the gifted students' had in their lives. The negative assumptions regarding students' home lives placed less of the responsibility on Mrs. Cleaver for lack of progress and more of the blame on their families (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Harris, 2012; Worthy, 2010). Harris (2012) warned that "deficit beliefs held by teachers about students and their families can become an institutional barrier" in the classroom that pushes the "burden for improvement" on the students (pp. 143-144). In doing this, teachers feel less responsible for their students' achievements, and they have less of an investment in their success. Logically, it follows that there is some correlation between Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) self-fulfilling prophesy, and these deficit beliefs about students' families. Teachers may give up on a student if they believe that their learning gaps were caused by an unavoidable home life. Even if this was not the case, it gave Mrs. Cleaver a reason to lower the expectations for regular students if she believed that the students did not have involved parents. When taken into consideration with previous statements made about regular students' parents, this statement painted a dark picture of what Mrs. Cleaver perceived to be the emotional and social support given to the students within the regular track.

Behavior and Discipline

The third theme that emerged in my study dealt with behavior and discipline described by Mrs. Cleaver. These behaviors included, but were not limited to, level of maturity, organizational skills, trustworthiness, and other behavioral aspects of her students that Mrs. Cleaver deemed important. Disciplinary measures were also incorporated into this section as it was correlated with the behaviors. My participant stated early in her introductory interview that she held all students to the same rules and procedures, and that both classes had some discipline

issues. However, Mrs. Cleaver never elaborated on any discipline issues in her gifted class, and made it clear that she expected the gifted students to be better behaved than the regular students.

When asked why she held them to a different standard, she responded in the following manner:

I guess being gifted and expecting them to have the brains to behave appropriately and to have the...not street smart but common sense to know what is right from wrong.

Whereas the regular kids, I expect it of them but not quite to the same level (March 28, 2016).

She clarified her statement by adding that she believed the regular students understood the rules, but they did not follow them as thoroughly because they were not held to as high of a standard at home either. This characterization of her tracked classes was typical of the literature in the field (Hand 2010; Nespor, 1985; Oakes, 1985; Page, 1991). Nespor (1985) found similar characterizations of junior high school students in English and mathematics classes. Although Nespor's study did not exclusively examine tracks, students were divided into two groups. The groups were distinguished by a binary system—essentially, the haves and the have-nots. For example, students either were mature, or they were not; they either had good working habits, or they did not. The parameters were determined by the teachers' perceived ability. In the cases where teachers saw a lack of ability, maturity, or good working habits, they felt that not much could be done other than to set up the classes in a manner that caused the least amount of problems for all parties involved. In Mrs. Cleaver's case, the dichotomy seemed to be determined by the tracking system, but the perceptions of her students were otherwise similar to the teachers involved in Nespor's (1985) study. I believe that Mrs. Cleaver's perception of her students matched Nespor's belief that the characterizations of the students in her study seemed to “correspond to entities which holistically characterized the students” and not just habits the

students had within her classroom (p. 11). This, Nespor argued, was dangerous because if the teachers viewed these characteristics as “inherent components of students’ personalities...the teachers [would] see the characteristics as immutable...as things beyond their control and influence” (p. 11). The same idea applied to Mrs. Cleaver’s class as she used negative characteristics to describe the regular students. It was possible that she viewed these characteristics as immutable and therefore, did not think she was able to do anything to change the outcome.

The gifted students were described favorably throughout the study in regards to both behavior and discipline. Mrs. Cleaver claimed that the gifted students were more prepared for her class, both academically and with the needed materials. She associated the gifted students with each of the following words: mature, truthful, motivated, organized, adaptive, and flexible. In the subsequent quote, Mrs. Cleaver described some of these positive behaviors:

The gifted students have had to work by themselves and [are] motivated by themselves to where they know it is their grade [and] their job to make sure their grade is what they need it to be.... The gifted [students] understand that this is their job; they have to get the education that they need in order to be successful (April 14, 2016).

Mrs. Cleaver credited the gifted students with being motivated by their grade and by the idea of being successful as reasons for positive behaviors. Perhaps, she believed that it was their internal “drive”—as mentioned in the first theme—that was the catalyst for this behavior. However, a “drive” can show up in many forms, and she also claimed that the gifted students made better decisions and were not followers. While these are similar to the “drive” Mrs. Cleaver described throughout the study, these behaviors manifested differently and were not necessarily connected to her belief that the gifted students were “driven.” Mrs. Cleaver’s belief

that the gifted students were motivated and made good decisions correlated with the increased time on the academics and less on discipline, which research has also shown in the last few decades (Caughlan & Kelly, 2004; Donaldson et al., 2016). For instance, Oakes (1990) also found that teachers in higher-tracked classes spent less time on discipline and class routines. This enabled the higher-track classes to have more time for learning activities, which was the case in Mrs. Cleaver's class as well. The increased amount of time on learning activities correlated with the level of success the students had in her classroom.

On a few occasions, Mrs. Cleaver associated the gifted students' positive behaviors with their giftedness. The idea of being labeled as gifted seemed to be enough of a reason for her to believe they should exhibit these behaviors. Mrs. Cleaver also described the gifted students as both confident and good problem-solvers. In addition to these traits, she explained that their maturity level led to positive outcomes in her class. In the gifted class, she used students to go around and check their peers' work because they were mature and trustworthy enough to allow for this. She stated that this was something exclusive to the gifted classes due to the good behaviors they exhibited and her lack of confidence in the regular students. Other times, Mrs. Cleaver placed emphasis on how they:

...value the education. They value that their grade is on the line. So if they don't pay attention, they understand that it could mean bad things. They will not be caught up with their friends as well because it is embarrassing if they don't understand something and their friends do (March 8, 2016).

In this quote, Mrs. Cleaver credited both a value of education and a competitive nature as the reasons for why gifted students had better behaviors than their peers. It was possible that these behaviors were a manifestation of how—as mentioned in the first theme—she believed the gifted

students cared more about her class than the regular students. Even if this was not the case, it highlighted how she believed the gifted students had better behaviors than their lower-tracked peers.

Mrs. Cleaver stated that the gifted students knew how to control themselves and each other in her classroom. She “trusted” the gifted students more “to allow [her] to get things done” within the classroom (March 8, 2016). She spoke of how she did not need to monitor the children as closely in this class because they were gifted. In my observations, Mrs. Cleaver spent a significantly less amount of time walking around monitoring the students while they worked. Instead, she used this time to complete some of the clerical tasks assigned to her that did not directly relate to her instruction. For example, on at least one occasion in the gifted class observations, she spent more than ten minutes at her desk grading papers. Other times she sat behind her desk doing other tasks. In the regular class, she was seldom behind her desk at all.

Mrs. Cleaver did not look upon the regular students as favorably as the gifted students in regards to their behaviors and discipline. She described this class as being unprepared, both academically and with a constant lack of needed materials. The regular students were described as followers, lazy, and students who have been spoon-fed since elementary school. Mrs. Cleaver also claimed that the regular students needed to be babysat more than others.

One of the main differences between the two classes in regards to her behavior was that Mrs. Cleaver constantly walked around in her regular class, while she often sat behind her desk in the gifted class. Sinclair (2005) claimed that teachers use their bodies to assert authority and maintain control in the classroom, among other things. When asked about this observation, she discussed at length how maintaining her physical presence throughout the duration of the regular class was needed to help the students focus and combat discipline issues:

Just being there, more often than not, is the biggest thing to make an impression on a child rather than [to] say anything. Just kind of being right around them. So, just your presence right next to them kind of gives them a heads up like, ‘hey, she is right there and she is listening’ (March 8, 2016).

She also claimed that the regular students stared at the wall or ceiling when she was not directly next to them. This lack of faith in her regular students’ ability to make good decisions and have positive behaviors showed up throughout the study.

Hand’s (2010) study of an eighth-grade math class—in a school that attempted to de-track—saw similar behaviors with her participant that I observed in Mrs. Cleaver’s class and discussed in the interviews. Although the class in Hand’s study was de-tracking, there were still many of the characteristics commonly linked with tracking and there were even unofficial track levels. The participant associated negative characteristics with the lower-tracked group of students and the classes were taught in a manner that reflected these beliefs. The lower-tracked class was considered to be constantly off-task, despite having started out willing to volunteer in class at the beginning of the year. While I do not know how Mrs. Cleaver’s classroom started out at the beginning of the year, I observed that the students in her regular class were still willing to participate. However, when the regular students’ mumbled answers or seemed hesitant, Mrs. Cleaver perceived them to be inattentive. Unsurprisingly, another behavioral issue that Mrs. Cleaver attributed to the lack of success in her regular class was inattentiveness.

Mrs. Cleaver claimed that she had to call on her regular students continuously to maintain their attention while walking around the room and verbally ask them to stay focused. She attributed those behaviors to their maturity level and assured me that this was exclusive to the regular students. It is important to note that in this instance, I did not choose to video due to a

perceived inattentiveness from the students. The video was filmed due to the differences in how eager the groups of students responded to questions posed by Mrs. Cleaver. I observed that the lower-tracked students seemed more eager to answer questions than their gifted peers. There were more students in the regular class shouting out answers as well as mumbling them from the back of the room. However, Mrs. Cleaver perceived these students to be only partially paying attention to the lesson and used the mumbling in the video-cued segment to justify this belief. In a sharp contrast to what I observed, she did not make a comment regarding the lack of participation from the gifted students. Instead, she focused on the few students in the gifted class who were shouting out answers and used them to represent the entire class. Although I did not find a single instance in the literature where a higher-track teacher created their own reality when faced with video evidence of the class, it seemed to align with the research that showcased an unbalanced approach that higher-tracked teachers took with their students.

Mrs. Cleaver also said that the regular students did not understand what it meant to get something done because they were not familiar with doing things in a productive manner and instead, just wanted to be taken care of or “babysat.” Even when given tasks, Mrs. Cleaver claimed that the regular student just wanted to get them over with, regardless of quality, and did not have the motivation to do well on assignments like their gifted peers. When prompted about work completion, she responded that many regular students were just lazy, while others were not working to their potential. Throughout the study, there were many instances of deficit thinking, where Mrs. Cleaver ascribed a negative attribute to the regular students as a way of rationalizing some aspect of the class dynamic or a typified behavior. Similarly, Nespor (1985) also concluded that the lower-track students were commonly linked with negative behaviors, such as laziness and being immature.

Making assumptions about the students' behaviors by track level left them at a severe disadvantage because it was related to a loss of educational opportunities in the classroom (Finley, 1984; Rist, 1970; Wilcox, 2015). The students in the regular classroom did not get as many opportunities to work independently without the teacher's assistance, which led to even more dependence on the teacher. In addition, Diamond et al. (2004) warned that assumptions by track level led to a disadvantage for the lower-tracked students because of the lack of variety of experiences in the classroom. While I believe that this did not always happen in Mrs. Cleaver's classroom, it did occur on a few occasions. After years of maneuvering through the tracking system, these differences add up to create vastly different students depending on their track level.

Intellect

The fourth theme that emerged from the data and perhaps the most telling, was that my participant made many connections between the students' track levels and their intellectual abilities. It became clear to me that these connections were quite different from the claims she made about the gifted students' "drive" and the deficiencies ascribed to the regular students that were mentioned in the first theme. In the first theme, Mrs. Cleaver attributed the students' ability to a drive or willingness to work hard and in the following section, she claimed that there was an intellectual difference between the two groups of students.

Despite her claim at the beginning of the study that she believed "every student [could] do the same assignment with assistance," there was a notable difference in how she discussed intellectual ability between the track levels (February 22, 2016). Not surprisingly, Mrs. Cleaver repeatedly made the correlation between higher intellectual ability and giftedness, while taking a more maternalistic approach to the perceived lower ability of her regular students. The literature surrounding this issue—collected over the past few decades—highlighted the negative effects

that these low expectations had on the lower-tracked students (Dreeben & Gamoran, 1986; Oakes, 1990; Page 1991; Worthy, 2010).

When pressed about her experience with gaining gifted certification, Mrs. Cleaver claimed that the process helped her understand what made a gifted student. She explained that gifted students had an “intrinsic knowledge base,” whereas these student “just got things,” and that the material “came naturally” (February 22, 2016). These beliefs worked counter to previous comments about how the gifted students’ “drive” made them successful. These comments were highlighted by the critical incidents Mrs. Cleaver examined in the study and were even used to explain a few of her gifted students’ shortfalls.

One of the ways in which Mrs. Cleaver said that schooling came naturally to the gifted students was that they were intellectually capable of adaptation. Mrs. Cleaver posited that the gifted students were able to overcome “their own learning styles” to adjust to how the teacher taught (April 1, 2016). She said that the gifted students did not have problems with the way she taught her class. Mrs. Cleaver made the claim that “with the gifted I could just show it. I can just show it and they will know it and that is pretty much it. We can move on” (March 8, 2016). This claim was reiterated at different times throughout the study when referring to the gifted students. More or less, she claimed that the gifted students were able to understand the material by just showing it to them and with very little teaching.

However, Mrs. Cleaver did not always just show the material once and move on. Sometimes, she gave the class time to do activities regarding the material to showcase what they had learned from the lesson. During one observation, Mrs. Cleaver gave her students drastically different activities regarding coordinate graphs. The gifted students used a blank grid to make a picture. She instructed that they were to have no more than sixty coordinates, which then was

copied down. After this, a classmate attempted to recreate their picture. In the regular class, the students identified letters on a coordinate grid and made a message that a classmate attempted to recreate. The gifted class was given more freedom to work on the activity, while the regular students were somewhat limited by predetermined coordinates. In my observations, both classes worked on the activity throughout the class. However, the gifted class was noticeably more excited about their final products and they showed them off to classmates and Mrs. Cleaver. In the lower-tracked class, the students were more passive when they worked on the assignment. Mrs. Cleaver accurately stated that the gifted students were more excited about their assignment because of the freedom associated with the assignment. However, Mrs. Cleaver anticipated, the lower-tracked students would be more complacent.

When asked what factored into the decision to have different activities, Mrs. Cleaver responded that she wanted the gifted students “to be a little bit more creative by actually taking their knowledge of coordinate pairs and creating a picture” (April 1, 2016). Her focus with the gifted students was to take their current knowledge and create something from it. On the other hand, she wanted the regular students “to be able to identify and use the coordinate pairs and just know where they [were] at” on the grid. She then claimed that the regular students would have been “a little out of control” if she allowed them the “freedom and creativity.” In my observation, her intentions were realized as the regular students did not lose control over their excitement from the assignment.

Research regarding instructional choice in tracked classes has yielded rich data that seemingly points in one direction—track level is a determinant in how the curriculum is taught (Diamond et al., 2004; Finley 1984; Dreeben & Gamoran, 1986; Oakes, 1985). Oakes (1985) found that gifted classes placed more importance on critical thinking and creativity than lower-

track classes. By doing this, the gifted classes were given the opportunities they needed to exceed the expectations, while the lower-track students were denied the same opportunities. Similarly, Hand (2010) concluded that teachers made mathematical tasks less rigorous in the lower-track classes by teaching them in a manner that focused more on rote memory and leading questions. The task given by Mrs. Cleaver focused on the repetition of one concept in the regular class, identifying predetermined coordinates. In the gifted class, there were multiple concepts being practiced in the assignment. The students in the regular class were denied the opportunity to work on a complex task and apply multiple concepts on the basis that—as a class—they were not capable of completing the assignment.

The students also received homework in Mrs. Cleaver's math classes. An argument could be made that incompleteness of these assignments would be considered a shortfall by any group of students. However, Mrs. Cleaver explained that many of her gifted students did not complete their homework because they figured out mathematically that they did not need to complete it in order to get a good grade. She dismissed it as a “mathematical choice” and that:

...they have gotten smart enough to kind of figure that out. And then some of them don't need the help. The homework is more of a spiraling homework to kind of go back to the beginning and work your way through the year again. And when they have done it over and over, some of them don't feel like they need the help anymore [or] need to practice anymore. So they are like, 'This is pointless. It is a waste of my time' (April 22, 2016).

Mrs. Cleaver believed that the gifted students were so intellectually advanced that they were able to compute their grade with and without the homework. Moreover, they also determined that it was a waste of time to complete the homework because they already knew the material it would not affect their grade enough to matter.

There was a stark dichotomy between Mrs. Cleaver's perception of the gifted students and the regular student's intellectual ability. While Mrs. Cleaver gave the gifted students an excuse for not completing their homework, she claimed that their lack of homework completion was one of the reasons the regular students were struggling with the course work. However, her negative beliefs regarding the lower-tracked students' intellect did not manifest as a loathing. Instead, she took a more maternalistic attitude with her students. This was something I observed in the classes and that she admitted in the introductory interview as well. In my observations, this showed up in the form of physical touch, such as high fives or pats on the back when the students were participating. It also showed up in the form of encouraging comments when the students made mistakes in front of the class, urging them to keep trying. These actions seemed contrary to some of the negative comments she had made throughout the study regarding the lower-tracked students.

Mrs. Cleaver did not leave it up to chance as to whether students were going to do something in the class, even if that meant doing it herself. In the regular class, Mrs. Cleaver noted that she asked "...if they wanted me to read [the directions] to them or if they were ok with just me giving [the assignment] to them without reading it to them" (April 1, 2016). This was quite different to her approach with the gifted students, where she used mathematical vocabulary without explanation because she was under the impression they already possessed the necessary information to interpret the terms.

The effects of low expectations are both immediate and long-lasting. Oakes (1990) found that lower-track math classes were academically at a disadvantage in her study of tracking in mathematics and science courses. She asserted that "lower-track classes not only typically offer a limited array of topics and skills, they consistently emphasize less-demanding topics and skills,

whereas high-track classes typically include more complex material and more difficult thinking and problem-solving tasks" (p. 81). The work was less challenging in the lower-track classes but it was also more limited. Teaching classes in such a manner leads to a lack of understanding for how to complete complex tasks and—in the long run—more learning gaps due to the limited coverage of topics. While there was only one occasion when Mrs. Cleaver omitted a topic due to the perceived difficulty of the topic, her “elementary” way of teaching the regular students limited their opportunity to learn more complex ideas and critical thinking skills. Rist (1970), among other researchers, also found that when the teacher perceived their students to be slower learners, there was a loss of opportunity to learn because the teacher lowered her standards (Hand, 2010; Watanabe, 2008).

On another occasion, Mrs. Cleaver stated she was more than willing to give the regular students information that they lacked. She did this almost immediately after prompting them with a question. She explained that by doing this, she gave them everything possible to make them successful. In the gifted class, however, she took a different approach. Mrs. Cleaver frequently asked her gifted students what something meant or why something worked out mathematically, and then she gave them time to think about her question before expecting a response to her prompt. At one point in the study, I asked about the differences in her expectations, and she responded that she had to “go down a little bit to get to their [the regular students’] level” (April 1, 2016). These differences in expectations allowed the gifted students to think more thoughtfully about the topic and restricted how the regular students thought about the material. These differences showcased her perception that the regular students were of a lower intellectual level than her gifted students.

Throughout the study, Mrs. Cleaver's approach to teaching different track levels meant differences in many aspects of her teaching. These differences included both how she explained topics and her call-and-response questioning. In one particular lesson, Mrs. Cleaver noted that she gave more hints and aided her regular students more than her gifted and justified her actions with the following:

When I realize it is not immediately coming to them, the answer, then I just kind of...without giving it away and just giving up on them, kind of giving them...I guess a crutch, so they can get a little bit more help (March 8, 2016).

When prompted with a question regarding whether she felt the regular students needed the support, Mrs. Cleaver added:

They might not need it as much as I give it to them. But I mean, [with the] gifted [class] I just say 'what is this?' and they can immediately tell me almost [the] textbook answer of what it is for the most part, for a lot of the kids. Whereas regular...I mean I ask,...but it might also be the way I teach it too.... They be taught it more elementary, so then I get it back more elementary. Whereas gifted, I kind of just say it and it goes (March 8, 2016).

Mrs. Cleaver acknowledged the possibility that she gave them too much help. Additionally, she recognized that part of the problem was that she taught the material at an elementary level for the regular students.

Mrs. Cleaver also made assumptions about how the regular students learned when she said:

...My regular students, they had to listen, and then I put it up there so they could also see because some of them are more visual learners. I don't think they have adapted to that as

much, having to listen and get directions just off of [sic] listening. I also show more videos in my regular class than I show in my gifted to kind of get points across (April 1, 2016).

Her assumption that the regular students did not multi-task as well as the gifted students became clear in this statement. For this reason, she read the directions to the regular students before putting them up on the board so that they did not have to complete both tasks at once. She also claimed that she showed the regular students more movies to help them understand, something she did not do in the gifted class. Once again, these differences in how she taught her classes were manifestations of her perceptions regarding the tracked class's intellectual ability levels. There is extant literature that also discusses how teachers of lower-track students have lowered expectations of their students (Ansalone, 2010; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Donaldson et al., 2016; Worthy, 2010). The low expectations cause differences in both how classes are taught (Diamond et al., 2004; Dreeben & Gamoran, 1986; Kelly & Carbonaro, 2012; Page, 1991) and what is taught (Anyon 1981; Finley, 1984; Harris 2012; Oakes, 1990; Watanabe, 2008). Both types of differences have a long-term effect on the students as they further the divide between the groups of students and create educational gaps that benefit one group over another.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a profile of Mrs. Cleaver, and reported the data. I introduced the themes that emerged in this single case study of a sixth-grade mathematics teacher who taught gifted and lower-track levels. Each theme was examined with regard to the literature. I explored how my participant viewed her students' willingness to work hard and examined how she employed assumptions about her students' home life. Next was a description of the students'

behavior and discipline. Finally, data related to assumptions my participant made regarding the students' intellectual abilities were presented. In the final chapter, I will provide a discussion of the findings, examine the implications as they relate to symbolic interactionism, and provide recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine how a math teacher's perceptions of her tracked students informed her pedagogical decision-making. The following research questions guided this study:

- RQ₁: How does a teacher's perceptions of groups of students she teaches compare to each other based on track level?
- RQ₂: What does teaching look like in tracked classes?
- RQ₃: Where does a teacher's perception of her class intersect with the strategies employed?

To answer these questions, I designed a qualitative research study that employed case study as the methodology. The data were analyzed using symbolic interactionism as the theoretical framework. My participant was a sixth-grade mathematics teacher, Mrs. Cleaver, who taught both gifted and regular education students. Not only did Mrs. Cleaver open up her classroom to observations, but she also agreed to audio and video recording. In addition, she participated in six interviews; the first was to get to know her as a teacher, and the others were to analyze her practice. Video-cued interviews (Tobin, 1988) were used in the latter five interviews to prompt Mrs. Cleaver on specific occurrences from the observations, and a semi-structured interview was used to get to know her as a teacher at the beginning of the study.

In this chapter, I summarize the themes from chapter four and discuss what they mean. Next, I examine my findings using the lens of symbolic interactionism, which is the theoretical

framework for this study. Thereafter, I summarize my findings by reflecting on the research questions that guided my study. Finally, I discuss the limitations of the study and provide recommendations for future research.

Summary of the Themes

The data analysis of this study generated four themes that intersected many of the interviews. These themes gave a depiction of how Mrs. Cleaver made sense of the critical incidents from the video-recorded observations. They also tell a story of how she perceived her students based on their track levels. When placed together, the data showed telling differences in how she viewed the classes. These differences had bearings on how she taught and how she formed her expectations for the students. The themes are discussed in the same order they were reported in the previous chapter.

Assumptions Regarding Students Willingness to Work Hard

Throughout my study, Mrs. Cleaver made assumptions about her students' willingness to work based on their track level. The assumptions she made in many of the interviews covered a range of topics, including personality traits, work ethic, and predictions about her students' future. My observations of her in the classroom reinforced these statements, as she provided the gifted students with more learning opportunities than the regular students. The case of Mrs. Cleaver was consistent with the extant literature, with treatments and assumptions of gifted students being positive and those of the lower-track students being mostly negative (Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Nesper, 1985; Oakes, 1990).

Although there were many positive attributes Mrs. Cleaver associated with the gifted class, one particularly stuck out. Her use of the word "driven" to describe the gifted class

occurred multiple times. On one occasion, she said that the gifted students had “their own ambition and their own drive of what their expectations are for themselves” (March 28, 2016). During another interview, Mrs. Cleaver asserted that the gifted students “just have more drive...than the regular students” (April 1, 2016). In contrast, Mrs. Cleaver claimed that the regular students did not care about their grades and did not try in class. She called them followers, lazy, and claimed that they lacked the mathematical skills necessary to be successful. However, she did not seem to exclusively blame the students for this problem. Mrs. Cleaver declared that it could be an “inherited stupidity [sic]” from their like-minded parents (April 14, 2016). Not only did she view the lower-track students negatively, but she also seemed to view their parents in the same light. Research has documented that the expectations set by the teachers do have an effect on the students (Caughlan & Kelly, 2004; Oakes, 1985; Rist, 1970; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). By assigning traits to the students based on their track level, teachers steer them in one of two pathways of success, with one being more favorable than the other.

Mrs. Cleaver also used many positive descriptors to highlight the gifted students’ work ethic. One such example was when she claimed that the gifted students could “handle” more challenging work in stride and were better at independent work than their regular-tracked peers. In Mrs. Cleaver’s regular classroom, the students were not described positively regarding their work ethic. She claimed that the regular students were over-reliant on her and lacked the effort to complete work on their own. These conversations leaked into the classroom as she blatantly told them on multiple occasions that that she was not going to do their work for them.

Her descriptions of the gifted students as more capable and the lower-tracked students as lacking good work ethic mirrored Harris’ (2012) study of secondary schools. Harris determined

that many teachers in her study had low expectations of the lower-tracked students and blamed them for their lack of progress. By doing this, the participants in her study avoided responsibility for their pupils' lack of progress. Also, Harris stated that low expectations affected the content that was taught in the classroom and even brought about a lower quality of instruction. Nespor (1985) also declared that low expectations led to very different classrooms when the teacher believed that the students' characteristics were immutable. In such a case, the teacher created classes that caused her the least amount of distress by assigning the students easy work and rewarding good behavior with decent grades. Lower-tracked students cannot be challenged and are left behind when their teachers give up on their progress.

Even though the students in Mrs. Cleaver's regular track class participated in many of the same activities as their gifted peers, there were some instances in which they were given different activities. When this happened, she also modified the information based on the track level. For example, Mrs. Cleaver did not teach her regular students the formula for the area of a trapezoid because she thought it would be a "hassle" and they would "revolt" if they had to learn another formula (March 28, 2016). Instead, she instructed them to decompose the shape into other shapes that they previously learned how to do. At the same time, the gifted students learned both ways. This spoke to her belief that the lower-track students were not able to handle the work-load associated with learning a new task. By treating her class in this manner, the regular class lost an opportunity to learn a new way of solving questions that they were given.

When asked how she saw her students in the future, Mrs. Cleaver gave an eye-opening response. She claimed that the gifted students were more likely to go to either college or technical school and that some of the regular students would "still be around here working in McDonald's, living in government housing, and not being as successful as the others" (February

22, 2016). Her characterization of the gifted students juxtaposed with that of her regular students and showcased the vast differences in her perceptions of the tracked students. These differences went well beyond the scope of her classroom and included their overall educational attainment. Also, the comment spoke to the lack of faith she had in her regular students to succeed in the same manner as her gifted students.

In summary, Mrs. Cleaver's characterization of her regular students was reminiscent of the way teachers represented the working-class students in Anyon's (1981) study of five economically diverse elementary schools. The teachers viewed their students as having deficits that caused them to be unsuccessful in the classroom. Unfortunately, this was translated into the regular students being viewed as holistically unsuccessful. In Mrs. Cleaver's class, this meant that she saw the regular students having fewer opportunities to expand their knowledge, challenge themselves, and achieve a high set of expectations in the classroom, thus needing a lower set of expectations. Ayers (2001) examined teachers' deficit thinking toward their students and claimed that part of the problem came from the labeling of students. Labeling the students established a narrowed vision, one which provided a limited scope and misled teachers, so they could not see the evolving nature of students. Mrs. Cleaver acted in such a manner that mirrored this idea and prohibited her from seeing the different perspectives in her students. She associated the lower-tracked students with not being willing to work hard, and the gifted students with a 'drive' and willing to do well in every instance. She did not seem to see the students as individuals but as members of the track for which they belonged.

Home Life

In the introductory interview, Mrs. Cleaver disclosed that her school was very diverse and had students from both housing projects and farming communities. Not surprisingly, she

also described disparate home situations between her students. In fact, Mrs. Cleaver mentioned home life as a predictor for the level of success for her students in both track levels. Specifically, she assumed that the gifted students had positive home environments, and that the regular students had largely negative home lives. These assumptions encompassed beliefs regarding parental involvement, parents' expectations of their children, and parental success—as indicated by the track level of their child.

Her assumptions about her tracked students extended well beyond the scope of the classroom. The broad assumptions she made about her students' home lives, which were based on their track level, became apparent in the introductory interview. She claimed to have an understanding of the level of parental involvement based on the track level, as indicated when she stated that gifted students had very involved parents and the lower-track students did not. Mrs. Cleaver had previously described herself as motherly and claimed the regular students typically lacked an involved mother figure. She used this as the basis for why she kept her regular class “more relationship based” (February 22, 2016).

Mrs. Cleaver's statement worked against the research of Bowles and Gintis (1976), whose study in high schools suggested that lower-track students had classes void of close interpersonal relationships. Their findings showcased that the lower-tracked classes focused more on rote activities and punitive measures, which was also substantiated by other researchers (Donaldson, LeChasseur, & Mayer, 2016; Harris, 2012; Oakes, 1985; Worthy, 2010). By maintaining a focus on the relationships within the classroom, Mrs. Cleaver could work on fostering a positive attitude with the students and learn a lot about them as well. Ayers (2001) claimed that “attending to the details of one child at a time... [could] strengthen a deeper and more powerful understanding of all children” (p. 37). Teaching in such a manner could lead to a

better understanding of her lower-tracked students. Unfortunately, Mrs. Cleaver's good intentions in her statement were largely lost in her practice. My observations only yielded moderate differences in how the classes were taught in this regard. These differences came in the form of encouraging comments to the regular students when they made a mistake or high fives and pats on the back when they did something correct. There did not seem to be a stronger connection between Mrs. Cleaver and the regular students on an individual level that would have resulted from focusing more on the relationships in this class. In other words, the differences seemed to only have an effect on the surface and did not change the dynamics of the classroom.

In addition to a lack of parental involvement, Mrs. Cleaver claimed that the regular students' parents had lower expectations of their children than the gifted parents did of theirs. The gifted students, she professed, "...have been expected to correct work and expected to perform at the best of their ability and they have just had to continue to reach a certain level" (April 14, 2016). In the quote, Mrs. Cleaver's assumption was not only that the gifted parents held their children to a higher standard in sixth grade, but that it had also occurred for some time. There were no such remarks regarding the regular parents' expectations of their children. However, she did make a vague reference to the expectations from regular parents when she claimed that they did not value education in their homes.

Her belief that parents' expectations correlated to school success was ironic considering my findings regarding her expectations of the students based on track level. Her deficit thinking toward the lower-tracked students provided them with a more elementary way of teaching and denied them opportunities to learn more complex tasks. However, I do not believe that Mrs. Cleaver connected her deficit beliefs with her practice to examine what kind of outcome it had on her classroom. Instead, Mrs. Cleaver's perception of her tracked students' home lives seemed

to be an attempt at explaining the static nature of their ability without accepting any responsibility from the practices in her classroom.

Mrs. Cleaver also asserted that the level of parental success was largely determined based on the track level of her students. This was derived from several comments she made during the study. The first example of such a statement was when she stated that: "...[the gifted student's] have seen their parents' work pay off and they kind of see that if they follow that route, they will probably be successful" (April 14, 2016). The assumption in this statement was that the gifted students had an example to follow to be successful. The only requirement that the gifted students had to be successful was to watch and emulate their parents.

In contrast, Mrs. Cleaver situated the regular students with the following comment: "...the regular students, some of them...do not really have that type of leadership in their life to show them that they have got work to do" (April 14, 2016). While the statement was distinguished by the term "some," Mrs. Cleaver did not offer any other example to describe the parents of the students in her regular class. This assumption, which was never qualified with any anecdote or real-life example, was nothing more than a broad statement in a much larger narrative of how she viewed the regular students. It was yet another way that she evaded responsibility for the lack of success she believed the regular students would attain.

A thorough review of the literature did not reveal a single study in which the participant correlated the parents' level of success explicitly with the track level of their children. Education research supports the idea that gifted students are more likely to come from affluent homes and lower-track students are more likely to come from working-class homes (Ansalone, 2010; Anyon, 1981; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Rist, 1970). While there is a possible link between affluence and levels of success, these links are more subjective and allow far too much bias from

the observer. I also question the validity that a teacher could accurately evaluate a parent's level of success from their vantage point. As a whole, Mrs. Cleaver believed that the gifted students had the support they needed at home to foster success and that the regular students did not.

Behavior and Discipline

Mrs. Cleaver also held differing expectations of the students for what she perceived to be appropriate behavior based on track level. These expectations were laid out early in the study, despite her claim in the introductory interview that she held all students to the same standards. For example, she asserted that the gifted students had "the brains to behave appropriately," but with the regular students, she did "...not quite [hold them] to the same level" (March 28, 2016). Mrs. Cleaver characterized the behaviors of the students based on track level, and used her physical presence in the regular class to deter discipline problems.

The behaviors that she ascribed to the gifted students were more positive than the lower-tracked students and possibly even manifestations of her belief that they had a "drive" to do well. She described the gifted students as more mature and adaptive. Mrs. Cleaver's perception that the gifted students were more mature led her to let the students have more freedoms in the classroom. These freedoms included peer grading and different group activities that Mrs. Cleaver believed the lower-tracked class could not handle. She also claimed that the gifted students were self-motivated and considered it to be "...their job to get the education that they need in order to be successful" (April 14, 2016). In juxtaposition to this was her characterization of the regular students, as being inattentive and immature. She spoke of having to constantly call on the students and walk around the room continuously to keep their attention.

Mrs. Cleaver also claimed that her gifted class did not warrant her continuous physical presence like the regular students. Due to how Mrs. Cleaver perceived their maturity level and

her belief that the gifted students warranted more trust, she was able to “get things done” within the classroom during her gifted class (March 8, 2016). In this class, she spent much more time behind her desk doing the clerical work associated with her job while the gifted students completed their work. This type of behavior was not the case for the regular class. She did not express the need to circulate the room or monitor the gifted students as closely. The gifted students stayed on task regardless of her close proximity “...because it is embarrassing if they don’t understand something and their friends do” (March 8, 2016).

On the other hand, Mrs. Cleaver mentioned that her regular students needed her close presence to assure they were on task. She claimed that her “...presence right next to them kind of gives them a heads up like, ‘hey, she is right there, and she is listening’...” (March 8, 2016). Mrs. Cleaver said that when she did not walk around and constantly monitor the students they would be inattentive or would not understand what they needed to accomplish. She felt that this was an integral part of the job and one that she did not particularly enjoy. She even referred to this as having to babysit the regular students, a task she believed to be necessary only in the regular class.

In my observations, her gifted students acted in a similar manner to the lower-track students. Both groups socialized with each other about the same amount of time and offered up silly and nonsensical answers from time to time to garner a laugh or eye-roll from Mrs. Cleaver. The difference seemed to be primarily in the way in which she perceived the students. The gifted students were perceived to have better behaviors perhaps due to their ability to complete the material at a level that Mrs. Cleaver deemed to be acceptable. The lower-tracked students were possibly associated with negative behaviors as yet another way to deflect responsibility for the lack of success she believed they would achieve in her class.

Intellect

Mrs. Cleaver did not view her tracked students' intellectual ability any differently than she viewed them as students, their home life, or their behaviors. Her students' intellectual abilities were regarded as being aligned with the track level in every example given throughout the duration of the study. This notion was antithetical to what she said in her introductory interview, that she believed "every student [could] do the same assignment with assistance" and to the idea she presented that the gifted students were successful because of their "drive" (February 22, 2016).

Mrs. Cleaver viewed the gifted students as being natural-born students. She claimed that they had an "intrinsic knowledge base" that was lacking in the regular students (February 22, 2016). This knowledge base—she claimed—made teaching the classes easier because she could move at a faster pace. In addition, she also stated in the same interview that the gifted students "just got things" and that mathematics "came naturally" to them. In fact, the gifted students were seen to be so adept that they could also overcome "their own learning styles" to meet the needs of the teacher (April 1, 2016). Research from the past four decades aligned with her belief that gifted students were more intellectually capable than their peers (Hand, 2010; Oakes, 1985; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

The faith Mrs. Cleaver showed in her gifted students' abilities as a whole was tremendous. Unfortunately, she did not share this same level of confidence in her regular students. She admittedly taught more at an "elementary" level to this group of students and said that she had to "go down a little bit to get to their level" (April 1, 2016). As an example, she neglected to teach the formula of a trapezoid to the regular students because she did not think it would go over well with the students. Another way in which she taught her regular class at a

more elementary level was in the instructions she gave to the classes. During one interview, she noted that a difference between how she gave instructions in the tracked classes was to ask the lower-tracked students if they wanted her to read the assignments to them. In the gifted class, Mrs. Cleaver just let the students go over the instructions themselves. At another point, she came to terms with the idea that her practices might be to blame for her regular students' reliance on her as she frequently gave them "...a crutch, so they get a little bit more help" (March 8, 2016). It was clear through the countless statements that she made that she did not have much faith in the lower-tracked students' abilities. Perhaps she thought that she helped these students by giving them "a crutch" and by teaching the material at a more elementary level. She claimed that she was not responsible for what she believed would inevitably be the lower-tracked students' lack of success in her class and perhaps this was her way of attempting to address the situation.

Mrs. Cleaver also mentioned creativity as another characteristic of the intellectual ability that she associated with her gifted students. She claimed that the gifted students were able "...to be a little bit more creative..." and apply their knowledge to the material in atypical ways (April 1, 2016). She used this as a reason for assigning the gifted students different activities from her regular students. In one such activity, the gifted students created a picture using coordinates and gave it to a classmate to be replicated. Each student determined the number of coordinates they wished to use for the image. Mrs. Cleaver's perception that the gifted students were more creative afforded them the opportunity to have more freedom in her class in the form of an activity with very few parameters. She stated that she gave the assignment to challenge and entertain the gifted students.

The regular students were given a much more structured assignment with less complex instructions. Their goal was to simply identify coordinates on a plane by using predetermined points that had been assigned letters. The lower-tracked students needed to use the points and make a message with the letters. When asked if the regular students were able to complete the assignment given to the gifted students, Mrs. Cleaver responded that the students would have been “a little out of control” if given the freedoms associated with the other assignment (April 1, 2016). She also claimed that the regular students would have “gotten too hung up on creating something funny and creating a drawing instead of the learning process” (April 1, 2016). Also, I asked her if the gifted students could have completed the activity assigned to the regular students. Mrs. Cleaver commented that the gifted kids would have completed the assignment too quickly to consider giving it to them, but she thought they still would have enjoyed that lesson. In the regular class, creativity was not considered to be a factor in the decision as to which activity to complete. Instead, the consideration of creativity was replaced with the fear of losing control of the class if they had a more complex assignment to complete.

Most students have at least one shortcoming, even though Mrs. Cleaver was not forthcoming with any she associated with the gifted students. At one point in the study, it seemed as though Mrs. Cleaver was going to highlight a shortcoming associated with the gifted students when she noted how they were not good at turning in their homework. She mentioned this as a reason that the regular students were not doing well in class, yet instead of considering this a shortcoming for her gifted students, she stated that they had mathematically figured out that they did not need to complete the homework to get a good grade in the class. Other students, she said “...don’t need the help.... Some of them don’t feel like they need the help anymore [or] need to practice anymore. So they are like, ‘This is pointless. It is a waste of my

time” (April 22, 2016). Her explanation for why gifted students did not complete their homework differed greatly with her explanation for the regular students.

Mrs. Cleaver took one of her gifted students’ shortcomings and turned it into another way to boast about them as a class. It is noteworthy to mention that I was unable to find a single study in my review of the literature that highlighted a teacher’s excuses for higher-tracked students not completing assignments in the manner that Mrs. Cleaver did in this study. However, while there may not be a study that showcased a teacher excusing the bad habits of her gifted students, there are explanations for her behavior in the literature. For example, Watanabe (2008) explained that “teachers’ actions are shaped by the structural organization of schools and the underlying expectations these policies connote, even if teachers do not always explicitly identify these factors in discussion about their curricular decisions” (p. 528). Mrs. Cleaver’s actions and perceptions of her tracked students might have been shaped by the structure of the tracking system. Logically, it follows that Mrs. Cleaver’s understanding of the tracked students developed in interaction with the structure of tracking, the school and district policies, and her experiences with the students. She was constantly interacting with and within the tracking system. It is possible that, as Watanabe claimed, she could not identify how the tracking system was a problem due to her participation in the structure.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism provided the theoretical lens for this study. Symbolic interactionism asks us to place ourselves in the place of another (Crotty, 1998), which challenged me to view things from the perspective of the participant. To give credence to my participant’s perspective, I focused on the three main ideas of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) that

were highlighted in Chapter one. These three ideas emphasize an individual's meaning-making regarding her unique experiences. The first idea is that individuals interact with objects based on the meanings they construct and assign. The interactions Mrs. Cleaver had with her tracked students were based on the meanings she had constructed. The second idea is that the meanings are assigned based on societal factors, not purely based on the individual's beliefs within a vacuum. Mrs. Cleaver's interactions with other teachers, parents, and students all compounded to support the meanings she assigned to the gifted and lower-tracked students. And thirdly, individuals' interpretations of objects are subject to change based on their evolving experiences. As Mrs. Cleaver had more interactions with her tracked students and scrutinized her own practice, her ideas were subject to change into something new.

Mrs. Cleaver's interactions with her students and her interpretation of the interactions were based on meanings she had created for them, which were categorized based on the ideas of social objects and symbols. Social objects are representations of physical objects that an actor focuses on, or what Charon (1992) defined as "any object in a situation that an actor uses for that situation" (p. 41). In my study, the social objects were the tracked students in Mrs. Cleaver's classes. In other words, Mrs. Cleaver spoke of the gifted students and the regular students as separate and whole groups, and assigned various attributes to the groups based on the track level for which they belonged. The parameter that defined her students as social objects was their track level, and this was how she viewed them as objects. For example, the students in the gifted class were not categorized in the seemingly endless number of ways which students could be categorized, such as student-athlete or gender. These students were viewed as gifted students—and carried with them all of the defining characteristics that she associated with giftedness. In the same manner, the regular students were all categorized in the same manner as social objects.

These students were seen as regular or lower-track students—who carried all of the negative characteristics that she associated with that particular group.

Throughout the study, the gifted students were defined in the context of Mrs. Cleaver's tracked classroom. The characteristics and attributes that she assigned to them such as being trustworthy or mature created an understanding of how she perceived her gifted students. These were characteristics of the students as social objects. However, Mrs. Cleaver also used symbols to position the gifted students as better students and children. A *symbol* is an understood and accepted meaning that is associated with an action (Blumer, 1969). Her use of symbols to position the students assisted in my understanding of how she perceived her tracked students.

There are many examples of symbols that Mrs. Cleaver used in the observations to further depict the students by track level. For example, she gave the gifted students more complex assignments than the regular students, which was symbolic of her belief that the gifted students were more intellectually capable of and better equipped as students than the regular student group. Mrs. Cleaver also used a symbol when she assigned the regular students less complex work and taught the class in a more "elementary" way. This was symbolic of her lack of faith in their abilities to attempt complex work. On another occasion, Mrs. Cleaver stated that the gifted students did not require her constant physical presence in the class. This was symbolic of her belief, which was also verbalized in an interview, that the gifted students were more self-disciplined than the regular students. This belief was compared to how she frequently used her physical presence in the regular classroom to deter discipline, which was symbolic of her belief that they could not follow the rules and procedures in the classroom without her continuously watching over them.

Another defining symbol was her predictions for the future success of her regular students. Mrs. Cleaver claimed that the regular students were more likely to be on government assistance or working at McDonald's. In using government assistance and working at McDonald's as a symbol, she expressed her lack of faith in the regular student's future success and motivation to do well. These symbols represent and confirm her verbal pronouncement and perceptions that gifted students were better students and possibly even better children than the regular students.

Societal factors also had a profound influence on how Mrs. Cleaver created meanings for the world around her. Tracking is a structure in the educational system that has a deep-rooted meaning based on many societal factors. Two of these factors are 1) how tracking is viewed by the actors who interact with the structure, and 2) the context behind the tracking system's conception, which was briefly described in Chapter one. Most students in American public schools are knowingly or unknowingly participants in the structure of tracking. They are placed in classes based on a perceived ability level and become social objects based on their track level. Their teachers are also actors within this structure, perpetuating the system and making sense of it simultaneously. Pressures from administrations, colleagues, professional development and training requirements, academics, and students are just a few of the actors that assist in shaping teachers' ideas of tracking. Mrs. Cleaver worked within such an environment, and the meanings she assigned to her students were likely influenced and shaped, in part, by the school culture and interactions she had with actors within her teaching profession.

However, it was difficult to judge exactly how much the societal factors contributed to Mrs. Cleaver's perspective. Perhaps this was due to what Meltzer, Petras, and Reynolds (1975) referred to as the assumption in symbolic interactionism that people's behaviors are not caused

“by forces within themselves...or by external forces impinging upon them...but what lie in between, a reflective and socially derived interpretation of the internal and external stimuli that are present” (p. 2). In other words, it was a combination of both social factors and her experiences that came together to form her views on a given topic (Charon, 1992). Similarly, Caughlan and Kelly (2004) found in their study of a tracked teacher that:

It was not entirely clear how [the participant] formulated her cultural models of students as differing However, it was clear that her allegiance to a well-developed system of curricular tracking was consistent with the cultural models she held of her students (p. 38).

Similar to Caughlan and Kelly’s research, Mrs. Cleaver’s actions and rationale behind her actions also spoke to her consistency with the documented societal views of tracking, yet it was unclear as to how much the societal factors contributed to her beliefs. It is understandable that prior researchers did not blame the teachers in their studies for perpetuating the structure of tracking because it was nearly impossible to determine whose responsibility it was (Finley, 1984; Page, 1987; Watanabe, 2008).

Perhaps the most significant idea that guides symbolic interactionism is the belief that an individual’s interpretations of the world changes and evolves with varied experiences. Societal factors account for some aspect of her experiences, but so does the interactions she has with others. As Charon (1992) stated, “...our action in the present is not determined by what went before, but by the definition of the situation in the present” and these situations regularly cause us to reinterpret our past (p. 133). As social beings, we are always interpreting our situations in reference to what we believe as both, an individual, and as part of a larger society.

The same can be said of a teacher's feelings or interpretations of the tracking system. As a teacher interacts with the structure of tracking and the participants within the structure, her views regarding the system are subject to change. Some experiences may reinforce larger societal views, and others may challenge beliefs. This leads me to my focus on the concept of *agency*. Within the context of my study, agency related to the teacher's conscious and deliberate ability to work against the structure of tracking. There was one comment Mrs. Cleaver made that challenged the status quo and the societal views of tracking, which was that "...every student can do the same assignment..." (February 22, 2016). She would have enacted agency by working against the documented purpose of the tracking system if she had taught her classes with this concept at the foreground. However, she did not make any similar comments after this nor was this approach to teaching observed in her class. In fact, she worked counter to this statement on many occasions throughout the study and provided a rationale for these actions in the video-cued interviews. Based on these reasons, Mrs. Cleaver did not enact agency in the study or work against the structure of tracking.

Summary

I asked three questions in my case study of a sixth-grade mathematics teacher who taught both gifted and regular classes. The questions explored how the teacher's perceptions of her tracked students compared based on track level, what teaching looked like in these classes, and how she enacted strategies differently based on the students in her room. My purpose was not to enter the study with a predetermined idea of what was to come, but instead to understand the participant and her interactions within her tracked classes. I chose case study as the methodology to examine the classes. This methodology fit my study best due to the emphasis

they placed on interactions within a specified bounded system as well as the requirement for an in-depth examination of the participant. In addition, the data derived from case studies are particularistic, or unique to the case. This was important because the study was not an attempt to explore how all tracked classes functioned, but to find out how my participant taught her tracked classes.

The combination of semi-structured interviews, recorded observations, and video-cued interviews all assisted in my attempt to answer the research questions. The semi-structured introductory interview afforded me with insight into the beliefs regarding teaching that she was willing to share. The recorded observations provided me with the actual classroom data to cross-reference with other forms of data and the critical incidents I used in the video-cued interviews. The video-cued interviews provided me with information regarding her actual practice, which was more telling than her beliefs in the introductory interview because they dealt with real-life examples.

The first question focused on how a teacher's perceptions of groups of her students compared to one another based on their track level. As it turned out, it was quite clear how Mrs. Cleaver's perceptions of the tracked students compared to each other. She positioned the gifted students in a continuous state of comparison with the regular students. Like the literature, the gifted students were given a more favorable characterization than their lower-tracked peers in almost every aspect. Her actions in the critical incidents, which were observed in the class and later explained by her in the video-cued interviews, also spoke volumes about her perceptions of the students. In these interviews, she articulated her biases toward the gifted students' abilities and her perception that they were better students than the regular students. Also, her explanations for the strategies she used in class were extensions of verbal characterizations for

her students. This bias was demonstrated in the more complex work the gifted students received and the freedoms they enjoyed in the class that were not shared by their regular-tracked peers.

However, it is also of importance to understand that Mrs. Cleaver's perceptions of her students were not atypical. In line with the ideology of symbolic interactionism, many other researchers also concluded that the teachers' perceptions of their tracked students were different, but that the societal factors of the structure of tracking made placing responsibility on the participant complex (Finley, 1984; Page, 1987; Watanabe, 2008). In other words, Mrs. Cleaver's perception of her tracked students was different based on the track level but that did not prove it was her fault. She was just a singular actor in a highly-complex structure that functioned on the basis that students should be treated differently based on their perceived ability.

The second question sought to understand what teaching looked like in a tracked classroom. For one, Mrs. Cleaver's tracked classes looked similar to one another on a surface level. The classes used the same notes and participated in the same lessons—with a few exceptions. This finding was different from some studies (Caughlan & Kelly, 2004; Oakes, 1985) that found significant differences in what the classes taught. While it was promising that Mrs. Cleaver was giving her students similar material in most cases, Oakes (1990) warned that even minor differences in how lower-tracked classes were taught would lead to a lower quality education as the differences accumulated over the years.

Mrs. Cleaver's classes were taught based on her beliefs that the lower-tracked students did not possess as many positive attributes and did not make good choices as often as the gifted students. The slight differences in the instruction and assignments were all attributed to deficiencies she believed the lower-tracked students possessed or to the positive attributes that were exclusive to the gifted students. Mrs. Cleaver taught her lower-tracked class using

documented strategies from the literature (Caughlan & Kelly, 2004; Hand, 2010; Oakes, 1985), with more focus on discipline and an attempt to maintain the attention of the students who were assumed to be disinterested in the topic. Caughlan and Kelly (2004) advised that the interactions between teachers and students were just as important as the material covered in the class. Mrs. Cleaver's interactions between her tracked students showcased both the differences in how the material was taught as well as the focus on less positive interactions in the lower-tracked class.

The last question attempted to answer where the teacher's perceptions of her classes intersected with the strategies that she employed. These intersections were observed most clearly when Mrs. Cleaver used the previously mentioned symbols to represent her perceptions of the students. In the gifted class, these intersections included the more complex work the students received and the lack of physical presence Mrs. Cleaver felt she needed to enforce rules and procedures. In her own words, she believed that these students were more capable and self-disciplined than their lower-tracked peers. These affordances led her to use the strategies in her gifted class that demonstrated these beliefs.

In the lower-tracked class, however, these intersections were showcased by how the students needed to be babysat more and how they required less complex work. They worked in conjunction with the idea that she held lowered expectations for the regular students. This was presented in the way that she taught her class, with a focus on building relationships and discipline rather than complex mathematical tasks that she believed they could not complete. All these intersections reinforced the idea that the gifted students were better and worthy of a higher-quality education than their lower-tracked peers.

In the beginning of this study, I briefly described the origins of tracking—a system which served the racist and classist eugenics movement. The tracking system was a major setback to

the immigrants, minorities, and working-class students who were largely affected by the system. However, tracking has evolved with time and maintained a constant presence in public schools despite the progression of American society. On a surface level, tracking seems to be much less negative for a student than in decades prior—possibly a response to the research that demonstrated the negative effects of tracking over the past four decades. Still, there are racist and classist connotations associated with tracking (Bonner, 2000; Oakes, 2005).

Although not an oversight, one thing missing from the discussion of my findings is the topic of race. Research has shown that race has been a determining factor of tracking for quite some time and continues to be a factor (Nunn, 2011; Oakes, 2005; Bonner, 2000). Nevertheless, racial tension did not appear prominently in Mrs. Cleaver's teaching delivery in such a way that could be construed as related to race or bigotry against any group of students, even though the demographics of both classes mirrored each other. As a result, it is difficult to say that race played a factor in how the school tracked students or if it affected how Mrs. Cleaver thought of the students. However, Nunn (2011) found that schools that did not intentionally address these issues were likely to have students that felt racialized in their track levels. It is possible that the students in Mrs. Cleaver's class may have felt they were occupying a space that was foreign to them, whether or not my participant knowingly or intentionally acted in a manner to make them feel this way. While they are often connected, race and socio-economic status did not seem to be tied to one another based on the comments made by my participant. Many of the comments Mrs. Cleaver made regarding the lower-track students spoke to assumptions regarding the students' lower socio-economic class statuses and not their races. These comments were included in the discussion, regarding future accomplishments, behaviors, home life, and perceived ability levels of the students. The opposite was true of the gifted students, who were commonly regarded as

having a more stable home life and higher socio-economic status than that of their lower-tracked peers.

If Mrs. Cleaver's assumptions regarding socio-economic status were true, the teacher was knowingly providing the more privileged students with a more rigorous classroom environment while disadvantaging the already disadvantaged students by denying them educational opportunities. Teaching in such a way would mean that she was thwarting growth in the lower-track students. If the assumptions regarding socio-economic status were not true, then the teacher would conduct her class in such a manner that limited the lower-track children from specific educational opportunities due to assumptions of their intellectual level. This speaks to the continuation of what tracking was originally intended to do, which was to keep specific types of students from achieving economic mobility. In regard to this study, I believe that the group of children being denied educational opportunities was primarily determined by socio-economic status as mediated through the tracking system.

Lastly, it is noteworthy to revisit the importance of the research setting and what it means to this study. As previously mentioned, sixth-grade mathematics offers a unique setting for tracking research. Sixth-grade marks the beginning of tracked classes for many students, which leaves a large amount of time in which the students are tracked during their schooling experiences. When this is coupled with the fact that research in the field warns of widening educational gaps in the lower-tracked students due to the loss of education opportunities (Hoffer, 1992; Pallas et al., 1994; Riordan, 2004), there is reason for concern. After conducting this study, I still have reason for concern that lower-tracked students have a widened educational gap due to the structure of tracking. Mrs. Cleaver did not offer the regular students the same

opportunities to learn during the study, which will likely compound with other losses in opportunity when those students move through middle school and in to high school.

Limitations

My study, like any other, has limitations. First, it was carried out with only one participant during one semester of her teaching career. Also, my participant's experience as a white female from a working-class family in Georgia shaded her experiences just as much as her time in the classroom; however, this is not to say that choosing any other single participant would have had different results. Even if I was to choose two participants to compare instead of one, it would not have had a more significant impact than any other arbitrary number. I did not claim to capture the multitude of possibilities that could occur within tracked classrooms around the country with one participant as I would not have with 100. However, I hoped to shed light on how teachers' perceptions of their students impact their teaching and the students in the classroom.

Another limitation is that I conducted this work where I was employed at the time of this study. There are implications for the findings as well as tensions that arise in such a situation. It is difficult to traverse through the politics involved with accurately representing the subject in a way that does not alter the relationship with that person—even if there is only a professional relationship with little contact. The tension is both ethical and personal in the sense that—as a researcher—I had a responsibility to accurately report the data regardless of what occurred. However, as a teacher in that building, I had a responsibility to the students and a felt a duty to help all students reach their potential. It became clear that there were inconsistencies with both how the students were perceived and being taught based on their track level while I was

conducting this study. While I chose not to involve myself in how Mrs. Cleaver conducted her classroom after the study, it created some tension based on how I felt the lower-tracked students were perceived.

A third limitation of this study is that I did not speak to the students in regard to how they felt they were being treated. Although outside the scope of the study, the students could provide additional information regarding how they interpreted Mrs. Cleaver's teaching practice. For example, I could have interviewed the students to see whether or not they felt that she treated them differently based on race or if being in the track level they were in made them feel ostracized. This information would have helped to strengthen an argument for or against the idea that race was a factor in how she treated the students. As a white male, I did not recognize any instance of intentional racial bias in her classroom. However, this is not a claim that racial bias did not occur in the selection process of determining who was gifted or even that racial bias did not occur within the room. It is only a claim that I was unable to identify any racial biases. Interviewing the students could also provide another dimension to cross-reference with the participant in the interviews; however, I believe it is possible that if I had interviewed the students, I would have seen changes in my participant's behavior once she began to get feedback from the students.

Lastly, a limitation of this study was that it only utilized a middle grades mathematics classroom. Mathematics provided a logical setting for this study due to the commonly accepted belief that there is a relationship between intellect and mathematical ability (Lerman, 2000). On the other hand, English Language Arts are another possible discipline where a similar study could provide useful insights due to the highly tracked nature of the classes. It is also possible that conducting this study in a high school setting could provide more perspective to the study

because it is closer to the end of schooling and would yield data on their trajectories after school. However, a middle grades setting was specifically chosen to address the lack of studies documented in this strand of research.

Implications

An implication of this study is that it is not a study of the tracking system. It is a study of a teacher working within the tracking system and making sense of her teaching in such a system. Even prior studies that took this approach still looked at multiple participants or went in to the classrooms to observe or simply interviewed their participants about their practice. Unlike those studies, this study asked the participant to become more involved in the research by providing an opportunity to explore her practice and provide more accurate explanations of the critical incidents during the video-cued interviews. This dynamic diverges from prior research in the field because it shifts more of the focus from the classroom to the participant herself. In having opportunities to provide insight into her pedagogical decision making, it provides more depth for what occurred in the classroom.

Another implication of this study is that—even when given the opportunity to examine her own practice—my participant did not reflect on her teaching in a meaningful way that affected how she taught. She simply recounted what she saw and how she interpreted it in the moment but did not think of other ways that she could have handled these situations. This suggests that she did not use this opportunity for reflection, and it is possible that others would not either.

Implications for Further Research

As mentioned, most research in the field of tracking utilized the researchers' interpretations of what occurs in the classrooms to draw conclusions. Not much is known about how the participants' perceptions of their tracked students affected classrooms. Future studies might continue to utilize the participant's voice when conducting research in tracked classes. Such research could provide insight into how differing perceptions in tracked classes affects them and whether there are commonalities between classrooms that have more equitable conditions.

Another justification for continuing to conduct research that includes the participant's voice is to examine whether other participants utilize the video-cued interviews as an opportunity to reflect on their practice in a meaningful way. However, it is important to note that while researchers may associate the use of video-cued interviews with self-reflection, this was not the case with my participant. Video-cued interviews add value to the study by providing a chance to foster self-reflection with teachers, but this does not mean that it will occur. Continuing the use of this protocol affords researchers the opportunity to analyze self-reflection when it does occur, but also speaks to the research when the participant does not utilize this opportunity.

I would also recommend future research that conducts similar studies on teachers from differing backgrounds—both demographically and professionally—to examine commonalities between them. It is just as important to conduct similar studies in schools that represent different types of students, similar to Anyon's (1981) study of economically disparate schools. The pervasive nature of tracking and its long-standing history in the American education system seems to suggest its permanence in the foreseeable future. By continuing research in this field, I

hope to minimize the inequitable effects of tracking and create a better space for all students to thrive.

Implications for Teaching Practice

This study provided implications that may apply to teachers in tracked classes throughout the country. First, the assumptions that teachers hold for their students have consequences on both their thinking and teaching. Being cognizant of this and getting to know the students as individuals combats these assumptions and allows them to make better judgments on the students' behalf. Next, teachers can provide a challenging and enriching environment for all children and not just the higher-tracked students. By challenging all students, it provides the disadvantaged students with a chance to grow and gives them the same opportunities to learn. Last, it is important for teachers to reflect on their teaching practice to find areas for growth as well as think of ways that will better their practice.

Concluding Thoughts

This study gave a snapshot of a middle grades mathematics teacher's perceptions of her tracked classes, how it affected the functionality of her classroom, and how her perceptions intersected with the strategies she used in each class. Based on the evolving nature of her beliefs, it is important to understand that this snapshot—while accurate at the time of this study—might not be recreated at any other moment. After I left her classroom, her experiences continued to shape her on a professional level just as every other teacher in the American education system. It is possible that her beliefs toward tracking could be altered in the future through a sequence of experiences. A change in her beliefs could lead to more equitable

practices in her classroom. This notion holds with it the promise that equity is always within reach in any given situation.

It was also possible that her experiences with this study changed her beliefs regarding tracking. I can, however, state with confidence that I did not witness any such change during or immediately after the study. Mrs. Cleaver initially stated that she felt nervous watching footage of herself teaching. I took this to be a good sign that she would spot differences in how she taught, but, instead, she only made a few comments regarding her posture and the tone of her voice with the children after the first round of video footage. None of the comments she made addressed the differences in the strategies she used. Following this instance, she did not make any other comments regarding the footage unless I prompted her with a question.

Also, the study did not seem to cause a realization that the different strategies she used in her tracked classes had an impact in how the classes performed or cause her to question her methods in any discernable way. She behaved in such a way to convey that she was a well-intentioned teacher who believed she was meeting the needs of her students to the best of her ability. She was acting in a manner that was reinforced by both what she claimed to learn from her training to become a gifted teacher and how she was shown by others in her experiences as a student and teacher. Unfortunately, I believe these same experiences strengthened her resolve as to whether she was doing what she needed to do to help the students. Despite decades of research saying otherwise, Mrs. Cleaver continued to teach in a manner that she was being led to believe was the only correct way to teach tracked classes and students, which was differently.

Oakes (1985) wrote that “it is never equitable to have any group of students be systematically offered less when it comes to educational quality” (p. 62). It is my conviction in this basic premise that drove me to conduct this study and to pursue a career in public schools. I

will continue to work with both my colleagues and students to make a better space for those in my classroom. And while one teacher's practice may not have a great effect on the American education system as a whole, it directly impacts the hundreds of students who walk in her door every day.

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APPENDIX A

Informational Letter for Potential Participants

Dear Teachers:

I am contacting you to ask you to take part in a research study. I have been given permission by your local school system to conduct my research at Carver Middle School. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide whether to be in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully before deciding if you are interested in participating in a research study at your school.

Purpose of Study

You are invited to participate in a dissertation study conducted as part of the requirements for the Doctorate of Philosophy at the University of Georgia. For this project I will be conducting an eleven-week study involving classroom observations and interviews on the topic of teacher perceptions and expectations across track level.

The purpose of this study is to uncover one of the many possibilities in which a teacher can teach tracked classes. All information will be confidential, and pseudonyms will be used for your school district, school, and for any name you use in the transcription from the interview as well as for your name.

I will begin the project by conducting an interview in which I will ask you a number of questions concerning tracking in schools. After this initial interview, I will conduct five video-cued interviews in which I will bring up video clips from your teaching. I will ask you to comment on decisions you make in the classroom regarding: classroom management, scaffolding of instructions, and the products that the students complete in your class.

Study Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to ...

- *Allow the researcher to observe in the classroom for a total of ten days (two classes each day) to be spaced out over an eleven-week period.*
- *Allow the researcher to audio and video record the observations in order to discuss them further during the interview phase of the study. Permission has been obtained by both your school system and your principal.*
- *Conduct an exploratory interview, which will last approximately sixty minutes to find out more about your background as an educator and student.*

- *Conduct five video-cued interviews, each lasting approximately sixty minutes, in which the researcher will use video data from the observations to ask you about your pedagogical decision-making.*

If you agree to participate, you and I are the only two people who will have access to the video and audio data and it will be secured digitally on an offline password protected storage device. All video and audio data will be destroyed and/or deleted six months following the completion of my degree program.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You would be free to withdraw your participation at any time during the study should you become uncomfortable with it. If you feel participating in this study my interest you, please contact me at xxx-xxx-xxxx. Thank you for your time!

APPENDIX B

Consent Form

Dear **NAME OF PARTICIPANT,**

Researcher's Statement

I am asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide whether to be in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." A copy of this form will be given to you.

Purpose of Study

You are invited to participate in a dissertation study conducted as part of the requirements for the Doctorate of Philosophy at the University of Georgia. For this project I will be conducting an eleven-week study involving classroom observations and interviews on the topic of teacher perceptions and expectations across track level.

The purpose of this study is to uncover one of the many possibilities in which a teacher can teach tracked classes. All information will be confidential, and pseudonyms will be used for your school district, school, and for any name you use in the transcription from the interview as well as for your name.

I will begin the project by conducting an interview in which I will ask you a number of questions concerning tracking in schools. After this initial interview, I will conduct five video-cued interviews in which I will bring up video clips from your teaching. I will ask you to comment on decisions you make in the classroom regarding: classroom management, scaffolding of instructions, and the products that the students complete in your class.

Principal Investigator: Dr. Margaret Wilder
Associate Professor, Department of Counseling and Human
Development Services
706-542-6488 or mwilder@uga.edu

Study Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to ...

- *Allow the researcher to observe in the classroom for a total of ten days (two classes each day) to be spaced out over an eleven-week period.*
- *Allow the researcher to audio and video record the observations.*

- *Conduct an exploratory interview, which will last approximately sixty minutes to find out more about your background as an educator and student.*
- *Conduct five video-cued interviews, each lasting approximately sixty minutes, in which the researcher will use video data from the observations to ask you about your pedagogical decision-making.*

You and I are the only two people who will have access to the video and audio data and it will be secured digitally on an offline password protected storage device. All video and audio data will be destroyed and/or deleted six months following the completion of my degree program.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to withdraw your participation at any time during the study should you become uncomfortable with it. If you have any questions or concerns during the study, feel free to contact me at xxx-xxx-xxxx. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu. I hope you will enjoy this opportunity to share your experiences and expertise with me. Thank you very much for your help.

Sincerely,

Bryan Shepard

Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form, and have had all of your questions answered.

Signature of Researcher

Date

Signature of Participant

Date

Please sign both copies, keep one copy and return one to the researcher.

Appendix C

The Introductory Interview Guide

My name is Bryan Shepard and I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Education at the University of Georgia. I am conducting a research project on tracking in the middle school setting. For the purpose of this interview, I define tracking as method used to create different classes of students based on ability level. Once again, thank you for dedicating this time to meeting with me.

Before we begin the interview, I would like to remind you that the information you share for this interview is kept confidential, as explained in the consent form. I will use a pseudonym to represent you and keep out any other identifying information about you that might allow someone to figure out who you are. Feel free to skip any questions you do not want to answer and at any time during the interview you may choose to end the interview. I anticipate that the interview will take between sixty and ninety minutes. Though I will be asking you questions, if at any time you have questions throughout the interview, please feel free to ask. At this point, do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Interview Questions

(Research Question: *What influence does track level have on teacher perceptions about students?*)

Educational Background Questions

I would like to begin our interview by getting to know you a little better as a student. The following questions will pertain to your education and teacher training.

- How would you describe yourself as a student in k-12?

- Were you labeled as gifted?
 - If yes, when were you labeled as gifted?
 - How did gifted differ from the other track levels?
 - What were the expectations for you in your classes?
 - What was your perceptions of how they compared to other tracks?
- Where did you attend college?
 - What program of study?
- Why did you pursue a career in teaching?
 - What experiences contributed to you making this decision?
 - Is this still true today?

Teaching Experience Questions

Next, I would like to ask you about your teaching experiences. Do you have any questions before we move on to this section of the interview?

- What is the most important aspect of schooling as it pertains to the students?
 - Can you describe your teaching experience?
 - How many years have you been teaching in total?
 - In what grade/subject?
 - How many of these years were spent teaching gifted?
 - In what grade/subject?
 - What locations have you taught at?
 - Can you describe each of the settings you taught at?
 - What subject and grade did you teach?

- How would you describe the relationship the school has with the community?
- Describe the demographics of the school
 - SES
 - Racial
 - Languages spoken
 - How did who you taught differ from the schools' overall demographics?
- How do they decide who teaches gifted at your school?
- How did you become gifted certified?
 - What influenced the decision to become gifted certified?
 - How well did the certification process prepare you to teach gifted?
 - In what ways do you use what you learned from the certification process in your gifted classes (either for the department you teach or for gifted children)?

Transition: Before we move on, is there anything you would like to add that you feel was instrumental in shaping who you are as a teacher?

Now, I would like to ask about your teaching beliefs.

Teacher Perceptions

- What are the procedural rules in your class?
 - Do they differ from class to class?
 - If yes, please describe.
- What are the expectations for students in your class?
 - How do they compare between the gifted and non-gifted classes?
 - If there are differences, please describe what they are.

- Why?
- How do you define success?
- Some teachers believe that hard-work is more important than ability when looking at success. Other teachers believe that parent involvement is the most crucial factor. What factors do you believe help make a student most successful and why?
 - Do you have an experience that sticks out that helped you shape this idea of success?
- What are your beliefs about how classes are separated by ability level?
 - Which type of class is preferable to teach and why?
- Some teachers expect products from gifted students that they do not from their other classes. For example, a teacher may give a project for their gifted students but not the others. Are there levels of students that can do some assignments that others cannot?
 - If yes, please explain:
 - What type of assignments are these?
 - What makes these assignments better for some students?
 - Can you share an experience in which this has occurred?
- How do you measure what a student is capable of in your class?

How do you compare how you grade students' work in gifted and non-gifted classes?

- From your perspective, what are the differences in ability in your regular/gifted classes?
 - What causes differences in ability levels?
 - What are your beliefs about students' ability levels being able to change?
 - Please describe a positive experience you have had with ability level in your class.

- Please describe a negative experience you have had with ability level in your class.
- Where do you envision your students in twenty years?
 - Why?
- How should schooling prepare children for their future?
 - In what ways is this occurring?
 - In what ways is this not occurring?
 - How can we improve upon this?

At this point, I have asked all of the questions that I need to ask. I would like to give you the opportunity to share anything else with me about this experience that you would like to add. Is there anything you would like to share?

I want to thank you for dedicating this time to me and sharing your experiences. I really appreciate your insight and willingness to be a part of this study. I look forward to our next meeting.

Appendix D

The Video-Cued Interview Guide

Before we begin the video-cued interview, I would like to remind you again that the information you share for this interview is kept confidential, as explained in the consent form. I will use a pseudonym to represent you and keep out any other identifying information about you that might allow someone to figure out who you are. Feel free to skip any questions you do not want to answer and at any time during the interview you may choose to end the interview. I anticipate that the interview will take between sixty and ninety minutes. Though I will be asking you questions, if at any time you have questions during interview, please feel free to ask. At this point, do you have any questions for me before we begin?

In this next interview, I will focus on footage from the observations that I selected to discuss and compare the two class periods that I observed in the previous week of observations. In this interview, please feel free to tell me as much information about the footage as you feel necessary. All information about the footage is useful to me as an observer.

Interview Questions

(Research Question: *Where does teacher perception and teaching intersect?*)

Observation Follow-up

I would like to begin our interview by talking about the observations in your classroom.

- Do you have any questions of me about the observations?
- Do you have anything you wanted to bring up about the observations before we begin?

At this point, we will begin.

Video-Cued Interview

You will review selected footage of your teaching. The footage will be a comparison of instances in both your gifted and non-gifted classes and you will be asked to reflect on what you see. Please feel free to ask to repeat the video or videos if you need to at any point. Do you have any questions?

- Watch one video at a time
 - Please tell me what you saw in this video
 - Can you give me insight into what led up to _____? (provide context for the video)
 - (if necessary) What other factors contributed to this decision?

Once the paired video is shared, ask:

- Please tell me what you saw in this video
- What are the similarities in these two videos?
- What are the differences between these two videos?
- What factors into the different ways of teaching/giving instructions/redirecting?
- Is there anything that you feel I may have left out?
- Is there anything you would like to add?

Repeat these questions for each of the sets of clips (one gifted and one non-gifted).

At this point, I have asked all the questions that I need to ask. I would like to give you the opportunity to share anything else with me about this experience that you would like to add. Is there anything you would like to share?

I want to thank you for dedicating this time to me and sharing your experiences. I really appreciate your insight and willingness to be a part of this study. Please feel free to contact me if there is anything further you wish to discuss before our next meeting. Thank you.