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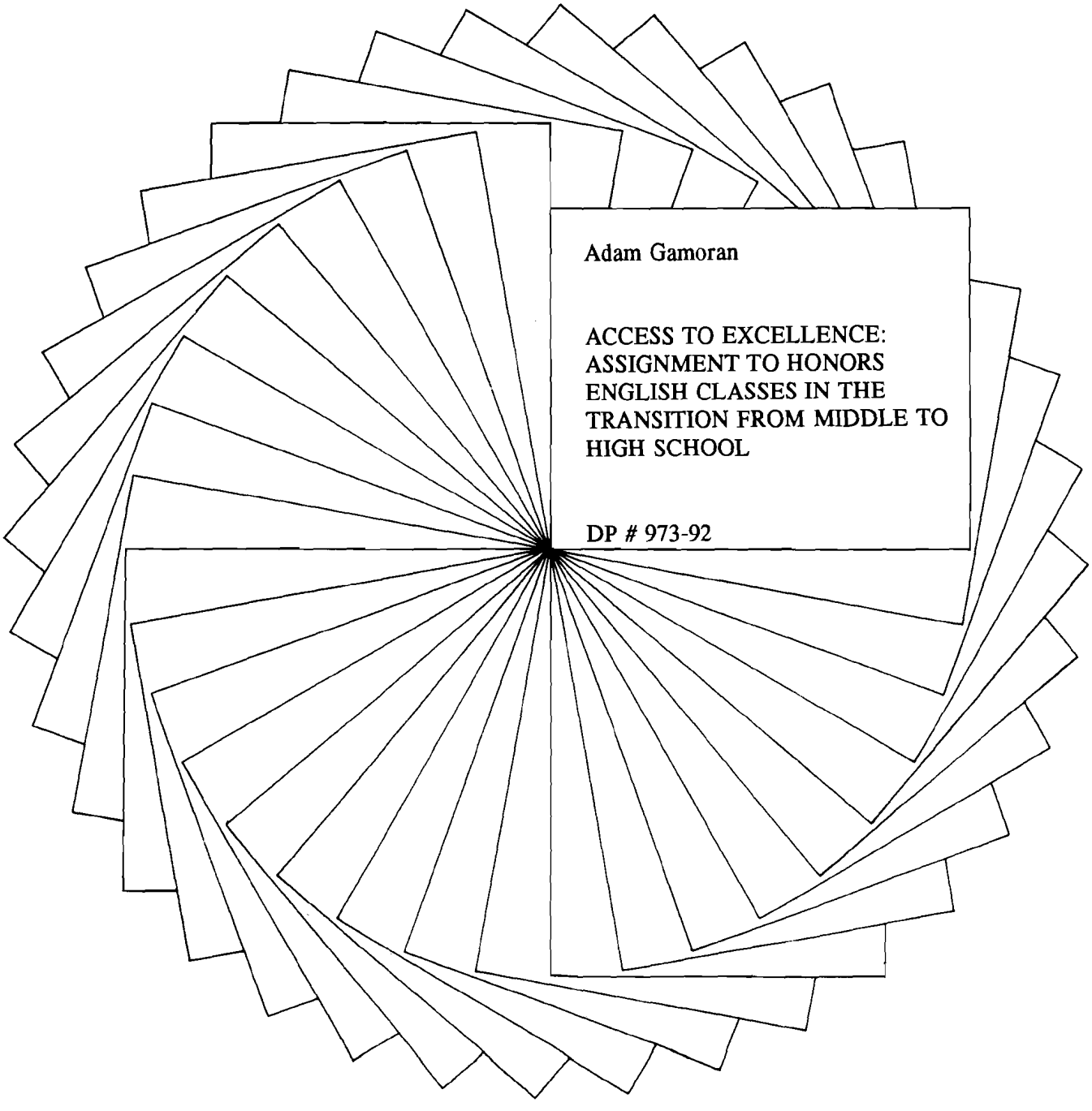

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ACCESS TO EXCELLENCE: ASSIGNMENT TO HONORS ENGLISH CLASSES IN THE TRANSITION FROM MIDDLE TO HIGH SCHOOL

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Access to Excellence: Assignment to Honors English Classes in the Transition from Middle to High School

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Abstract

This paper examines the processes and criteria of assignment to honors English classes in five midwestern communities. It uses qualitative and quantitative data to study the placement process in the context of the transition from middle to high school. Interviews with school staff provide descriptive accounts of the stratification system in each district, revealing a number of important similarities along with salient differences. These patterns are further elucidated with quantitative analyses of placement criteria. Although student performance affects placement in all districts, at least three of the five rely heavily on students' past ability-group positions in assigning students for ninth-grade English. This practice limits opportunities for upward mobility for students outside the honors level. Another finding is that the effects of family background depend on student achievement levels: for high-achieving students, socioeconomic status plays little role in placement decisions, but among average achievers, economic advantage is linked to greater access to honors classes.

Access to Excellence:
Assignment to Honors English Classes
in the Transition from Middle to High School

High school tracking continues to receive attention from sociologists. In recent years, longitudinal studies have documented its effects on achievement and postsecondary educational attainment (see Gamoran and Berends, 1987, for a review). The significant impact of secondary school stratification, as one study concluded, "makes it all the more important that the practices of assigning and moving students be both pedagogically sound and fair" (Natriello, Pallas, and Alexander, 1989, p.117). Despite attention paid to the effects of tracking, however, research on who gets assigned to the different tracks has been more limited, relying mainly on cross-sectional data and on a narrow set of prediction criteria. The actual process through which assignment occurs has received even less critical notice.

This study contributes to our understanding of the placement process and its outcomes. It argues, first, that some of the limitations of previous research can be overcome by examining track assignment in the context of an educational transition: the move from middle to high school. Such transitions may serve as key points in students' educational careers (Bidwell, 1989). Second, the paper moves beyond the study of ascribed versus achieved characteristics as placement criteria, to examine the organizational linkages that are central to the placement process. Are students in advanced classes in middle school likely to be in advanced classes in high school? Likewise, are students in regular and basic courses likely to remain in them? Third, following the work of Garet and DeLany (1988), the paper shows that analyses within subject areas--in this case, English--avoid the ambiguity of assessing track assignment in schools that have no formal tracking.

CURRENT KNOWLEDGE ON THE PLACEMENT PROCESS

In the 1970s, a number of survey analyses were conducted to learn whether track assignment was more closely associated with achieved or ascribed characteristics (Heyns, 1974; Alexander and McDill, 1976; Alexander, Cook, and McDill, 1978; Rehberg and Rosenthal, 1978). The results pointed to achievement as the main criterion, with additional smaller effects of family background. Later studies observed that although minority students are typically underrepresented in higher tracks, the deficit can be attributed to differences in socioeconomic status and prior achievement (Gamoran and Mare, 1989). Work during the 1980s also considered organizational conditions, indicating, for example, that students had a better chance of entering a college-preparatory track in a school that reserved more spaces in that program (DeLany, 1986; Jones, Vanfossen, and Spade, 1986; Gamoran, 1987; Sorensen, 1987; Garet and DeLany, 1988; Gamoran and Mare, 1989).

Despite the contributions of these studies, our knowledge of the stratification process has three important shortcomings. First, we know little about transitions across levels of schooling. Second, studies of the criteria of track placement have been divorced from studies of the process. Third, ambiguity in the concept of a "track" in contemporary high schools needs to be recognized.

The Transition to High School

In some countries, it is obvious that shifts from one level of schooling to the next constitute the key points at which educational stratification must be examined. In Japan, for example, students move from an academically heterogeneous junior high system to a highly stratified set of high schools, a transition which essentially dictates their subsequent educational trajectories (Rohlen, 1983). The assignment process in Japan could not be understood without examining it at this point (Kariya and Rosenbaum, 1987). Stratification in American high schools is not as salient, but to understand it fully it may be just as important to consider the transition point at which it occurs. In

the United States, as in Japan, the high school placement process begins before high school, so studies of track assignment need to begin at an earlier point in time.

To what extent do students' academic records follow them across the levels of the school system? In what was until recently the only American survey of tracking with data prior to high school entry, Alexander and Cook (1982) found that students who took a foreign language in junior high had a better chance of enrolling in the college track in high school (see Gamoran and Berends, 1987, p.417, for a list of survey data sets). Rosenbaum (1976) observed the same pattern in a case study. The finding may reflect a broader set of linkages that connect the junior and senior high stratification systems. This interpretation is consistent with new data collected by Hallinan (1991), which showed significant effects of eighth-grade English and math tracks on ninth-grade track locations. It also accords with studies in Israel, Taiwan, and Great Britain, which revealed significant effects of junior high ability-group positions on students' high school trajectories (Yogev, 1981; Hsieh, 1987; Kerckhoff, in press).

Other U.S. case studies also testify to the importance of students' records prior to high school for high school placement. In a study of school stratification in Chicago, Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, Moore and Davenport (1988, p.54) discovered that "participation in a particular track or group within an elementary or junior high school was often necessary to participate in a desired track or program in high school." Years earlier, Parsons (1959, p.299) had concluded from a study of Boston schools "that the primary selective process occurs through differential school performance in elementary school, and that the 'seal' is put on it in junior high school." To understand why some students gain admission to high-status positions in high school, one must consider their positions in junior high.

Another reason for gathering data prior to high school entry is that reliance on later information confuses the causes of track placement with its consequences. For example, Gamoran

and Mare (1989) used achievement test scores from High School and Beyond (HSB), a nationally representative survey data set, to assess probabilities of assignment to the college-preparatory track in tenth grade. Because they measured achievement at the same point in time as track position--spring of the sophomore year--their analysis probably overestimated the effects of achievement on track placement. On the other hand, studies that omit prior achievement from the analysis almost certainly overstate the importance of other variables, such as students' social class backgrounds (e.g., Lee and Bryk, 1988). Collecting data before students enter high school helps resolve this problem.

Separate Studies of Criteria and Processes

There have been many studies of placement criteria, and a few of the placement process, but the two have not been synthesized well. For example, by observing interaction between counselors and students, Cicourel and Kitsuse (1963) learned that grades and test scores were evaluated differently for students from different sorts of families. Low-income students with low grades and average test scores were directed to the low track, but students with similar performance records from middle-income families were placed in a middle track. This finding might be seen as a hypothesis worthy of testing in a multivariate framework, yet such a test has never been applied. More generally, insights from observers about how the placement process works need to be brought to bear on quantitative studies of who is admitted to the preferred tracks and classes (Garet and DeLany, 1988).

The situation is complicated by the diversity of placement processes across school districts. In sharp contrast to Japan, where admission practices are the same at all high schools (performance on an entrance test is the sole criterion), American high schools differ widely in the procedures used to divide students. Some attend to student preferences, while others allow little student choice (Lee and Bryk, 1988). Some schools provide different amounts of information about course options and college requirements to different students, depending on their social class, race, or prior ability

group, but others may not discriminate in this manner (Cicourel and Kitsuse, 1963; Heyns, 1974; Rosenbaum, 1976; Oakes, 1985). In some districts, students' programs for the first year of high school are devised by junior high staff, but elsewhere these decisions occur in the high school. Although matching students to courses is in principle an advising and counseling issue, in many cases scarcity of resources and uncertainty about student and teacher populations turn it into primarily a logistical problem (DeLany, 1991). Finally, most schools seem to rely on a combination of teacher recommendations, test scores, and prior coursework, but they differ in the weight attached to each criterion.

Such diversity in the processes of stratification may affect the criteria of assignment as well as students' assignment probabilities. For example, the pattern detected by Cicourel and Kitsuse may be important in a district that allows counselors to use discretion in making assignments, but it might matter less where counselors simply rank students on the basis of test scores or prior rank. Consequently, studies of placement criteria need to be viewed in the context of the assignment practices in particular school systems.

Ambiguity in the Definition of Track Positions

Not only do districts differ in assignment practices, but they also vary in the categories into which students are divided, and in what constitutes a college-preparatory program. Indeed, it seems that many or even most American high schools have no formal tracking system. Students are typically divided into levels, or ability groups, for specific courses, but not into overall tracks that dictate their entire programs of study (Oakes, 1985; Moore and Davenport, 1988).

The notion of a track may not have lost its utility, for subject-specific divisions may coincide to form unacknowledged tracks within a school (Finley, 1984; Moore and Davenport, 1988). But when the term is absent from the official vocabulary, it becomes difficult to define exactly what a track is and who resides in each one. In this case tracking is an artificial construct, used by the

researcher to describe a pattern or structure within a school, but lacking meaning in the minds of participants, particularly students.

Course-level stratification does not suffer from this ambiguity. Courses for a given grade are typically divided into levels with titles that clearly indicate their standing: honors, regular, and basic, for example, are typical labels for ninth-grade English courses (Moore and Davenport, 1988). Or, especially in math, courses may be arranged in a sequence: general math, prealgebra, algebra, geometry, and so on. In either case, the status rankings are clear to all participants. Thus, learning about placement criteria and processes for specific courses seems central to our understanding of stratification in high schools (Garet and DeLany, 1988).

Although Moore and Davenport (1988) noted some instances of "block-rostering," in which students were assigned to several courses at the same ability level simultaneously, generally it appears that placement decisions are made on a subject-by-subject basis, sometimes even occurring inside subject-matter departments in high schools: the English department makes out the list for honors English, the math department decides whom to admit to freshman algebra, and so on (Oakes, 1985). Thus, both the ambiguity about what constitutes a "track," and the subject-specificity of decisions, lead one to consider the process and criteria of placement for particular courses, rather than for overall tracks or programs.

Access to Honors English at High School Entry

These considerations lead one to study high school placement by beginning at the junior high level. They suggest examining assignment criteria in the context of processes that vary across districts, and considering subject-specific placement, rather than assignment to overall tracks. In response, I have examined the process and criteria of placement into ninth-grade honors English classes in five communities.

Why study honors English? Besides the reasons given for studying a single department, why this one in particular? Divisions within English courses--especially the distinction between honors and other classes--matter for schooling outcomes. National survey data show that students who enrolled in honors English classes gained more on tests of reading, writing, and vocabulary (Gamoran, 1987). Furthermore, students in different levels of a given English course are exposed to different sorts of knowledge, with those in higher-status groups reading more classic literature, writing more, and engaging in more criticism than those in other classes (Keddie, 1971; Ball, 1981; Oakes, 1985; Gamoran, 1989). Honors English classes may be a source of cultural capital, providing students with the familiarity with and understanding of high-status literature that will enable them to participate in elite social groups. Thus, who gets to enroll in honors English is a question of interest in its own right, in addition to being a useful direction for the study of high school stratification.

THE PLACEMENT PROCESS IN FIVE COMMUNITIES

The five communities included four public school districts--one suburban, one small town/rural, and two urban districts--and one Catholic diocese spanning an urban and suburban area. All are located in the midwest. These districts participated in a larger study of tracking in eighth and ninth grade.[1] For this part of the study, data were gathered from three sources: interviews with school staff, school records, and student tests and questionnaires. Staff members interviewed included the principal and one or more English teachers from each junior and senior high, the English department chair from each high school, and a guidance counselor wherever there was one on staff. Data were collected from the junior highs in 1987-88, and from the senior high schools during the following year.

The analytic strategy combines a multisite case study approach with a quantitative analysis. I first used the interview data to learn how school staff perceive the placement process in the five

communities. From these descriptions I derived predictions about placement criteria, which I then examined quantitatively using data from the surveys and the school records.

District A: Test Scores and Recommendations

District A consists of a single high school that draws students from well-to-do suburbs, with a few less-advantaged students bussed in from a nearby city. Two of the district's feeder middle schools participated in the study; one contained about seventy eighth graders, and the other had nearly twice that. The high school freshman class numbered about three hundred students.

"Performance grouping" is the term used to describe stratification in the high school. Counselors, principals, and department heads were unanimous in emphasizing the meritocratic nature of placement in their system. Placement is based solely on past performance, they maintained, which is indicated by test scores, teacher recommendations, and grades.

Each spring, eighth-grade English teachers are asked to recommend a ninth-grade class level for each student: basic, regular, accelerated, or honors. They are asked to consider motivation and class performance when filling out the recommendation forms. These recommendations, along with standardized test scores and a sample of each student's writing, are sent to the high school English department. According to the English department head, the standardized test result is the most important criterion, followed by the teacher recommendation. The recommendation "often can explain a discrepancy [among] the test scores," she explained.

When parents call to ask for specific placements, their requests are generally honored. This was relatively uncommon, according to the English department coordinator, involving perhaps twenty-five out of over three hundred students in the cohort. Still, it may have enhanced the connection between family background and English class assignment, because well-off parents are known to advocate on their children's behalf more often (Baker and Stevenson, 1986).

Table 1 summarizes the placement process in each district as described by school staff. On the basis of the interviews it appears that in District A, access to honors English depends mainly on test scores, grades, and effort, with much weaker if any impact of ascribed characteristics and prior placement.

District B: Last Year's Honors Class

District B consists of a small town and the surrounding rural area. About 10 percent of the students live on farms, and virtually all students are white and non-Hispanic. The district includes one junior high and one high school, each containing about 220 students per grade.

As in District A, students in District B are assigned to stratified ninth-grade English classes. Although teacher recommendations and test scores were again mentioned as criteria, the information was used in a very different way. Assignments in District B are largely determined at the junior high. In English, the eighth-grade teachers begin with the current class lists, make any adjustments they see fit, and pass on the lists to the high school via the guidance department. Thus, in District B the junior high teachers provide not simply recommendations, but the actual lists that comprise the ninth-grade classes.

Ninth-grade assignments appeared to replicate eighth-grade positions in two ways. First, at an organizational level, the structure of stratification in the English department is identical in the two schools: students are divided into accelerated, regular, and low-ability classes. Second, at an individual level, it was clear that students' ninth-grade positions were largely predetermined. This was evident from the manner in which assignments were made: the eighth-grade teachers relied mainly on the eighth-grade lists, making changes only at the margins. The close relation between eighth- and ninth-grade honors English was acknowledged by the junior-high guidance counselor: "To qualify for the accelerated class at the high school, they have to be in [the accelerated class] here. . . . The [accelerated] English curriculum is a little bit more complicated than our regular

TABLE 1

Assignment to Honors English in Five Communities, as Described by School Staff

District	Main Decision-Maker	Main Reported Criteria	Predictions
A: Public, suburban	High school English department	Standardized tests, teacher recommendations	Strong effects of tests, grades, and effort.
B: Public, small town/rural	Eighth-grade English teachers	Teacher recommendations	Strong effects of prior positions.
C: Public, urban, working class	Junior high staff	Teacher recommendations, student/parent preference for special program	Moderate effects of tests, grades, and effort. Moderate effects of prior positions. Moderate effects of racial/ethnic and economic background.
D: Public, urban, middle class	High school English department	Teacher recommendations, placement test	Strong effects of tests, grades, and effort. Junior high positions irrelevant. Racial/ethnic, economic background irrelevant.
E: Catholic, urban/suburban	High school English dept. chair	Placement test	Strong influence of tests. Weak influence of other achieved characteristics. Junior high positions irrelevant.

[curriculum]," he explained. Although standardized test scores are available to the junior high teachers, they rarely consult them when filling out their lists. Performance in class, however, might cause the teachers to move a student to or from the honors level.

This system is not considered capricious or non-meritocratic. Indeed, the high school English department chair described the differences between class levels in terms of test scores. But the correlation between rank and test scores in this district appears to result largely from a cumulative process of assignment based on teacher judgment, with attention to test scores in earlier years. According to the junior high counselor, the staff believes that by the eighth grade, appropriate placement decisions have already been made. Experimentation occurs during seventh grade, he reported, so that positions are well established by eighth grade. Hence, assignment for high school is viewed as an organizational problem in which the key issue is creating class lists, rather than as an educational problem in which students' abilities and needs must be assessed.

The interviews lead to the conclusion that the influential placement criteria in District B are not the same as in District A. In District B, it seems that entry to ninth-grade accelerated English depends largely on having been enrolled in eighth-grade accelerated English.

District C: Two Routes to an Honors Class

District C is located in an urban community with three junior high schools feeding into two high schools, all of which participated in the study. The high schools each contained about four hundred freshmen. The average student in District C has working-class parents and may be a member of a minority group: the district is about 45 percent white, 30 percent black, and 25 percent Hispanic and others. There is some economic diversity in the district; about 20 percent of the students had parents with managerial or professional occupations.

In District C, as in District B, placement decisions occur at the junior high level. The junior high counselors send packets of registration forms to the high schools, indicating the classes in which

each student is to enroll. These forms are prepared by junior high counselors and teachers. In two schools the teachers mark recommendations first, and give them to the counselors who compare them to test scores; in the third the counselor fills out the forms first and passes them on to the teachers.

According to these staff members, teacher recommendations and standardized tests serve as the main assignment criteria. By the time the lists arrive at the high schools, sorting students has been restricted to a logistical problem of scheduling; educational questions are not pertinent. The process had evolved out of a struggle between the junior and senior high guidance departments. In the past, I was told, recommendations made at the junior high level had been drastically revised at the high school. This led to resentment among the junior high staff, who thought their judgment was questioned and their work ignored. Consequently the senior high staff agreed to abide by the junior high decisions. The counselors in both high schools reported that they adjust the placements only for "consistency": to make sure that no student was registered for both honors English and basic history, for example. It seemed to me that these adjustments were made to conform to standard practice rather than to ensure that students' needs were met. One high school department chair complained that students were often assigned to the wrong levels because the junior high staff did not understand the system. But her objections did not affect the assignment process or its results.

Formally, students and parents play a role in the process: before the registration forms are delivered to the high schools they are sent home for parent signatures. However, parents almost always sign for what the teachers and counselors have recommended, and if they object, they are required to sign a waiver acknowledging that assignment was based on their own decision and was opposed by school staff.

There is one important exception to the absence of parental choice. One of the high schools has a school-within-a-school program with a heavy academic emphasis. Enrollment in this program is voluntary, and students need only be at or above grade level in standardized test results. Although

the program is not reserved for high achievers, students are told to expect a heavy workload, and to a large extent the students are self-selected on an academic basis. Thus, in this district there are two routes to a high-status English class: one could be assigned to an honors class by junior high counselors and teachers, or one could sign up for the academically rigorous school-within-a-school program.

Socioeconomic status (SES) may also play a role in placement in District C. First, one might expect high-SES parents to be better informed and more eager to have their students sign up for the school-within-a-school program. Second, the counselor at one of the senior high schools acknowledged that students from high-status families were a bit more likely to be pushed toward the high-status programs. He thought he might be more likely to push a student capable of more challenging work if the student were from a higher-SES family which more often supported such coaxing. Third, the comments of a junior high counselor seemed to reflect expectations that varied by students' backgrounds:

> I have always been a realist . . . I've felt that we are too optimistic in American education, and somebody ought to tell the kids the truth. So in my counseling I've always tried to lead the student to see himself in a realistic way. . . . Here at the junior high in this particular town with the low-socioeconomic, high ethnic background [of students], I have softened that somewhat, because I would professionally be in trouble if I followed through with my philosophy . . ."

This counselor argued that poor, minority students need a clearer understanding of what the future is likely to hold for them. In effect, he was advocating a more efficient "cooling-out" process, in which students receive clues about their likely future prospects, which might lessen low-SES and minority students' chances to obtain high rank (Clark, 1960; Karabel, 1972). Finally, when the high school counselors adjust course assignments for "consistency," low-SES and minority students might more often be shifted downward because they are less likely to be registered for multiple honors courses in the first place.

Because of the centrality of organizational concerns in the placement process, it appears that prior coursework, grades, and test scores all affect assignment to honors English in this district. One may also expect to find direct effects of SES and minority background, for the reasons listed above, and indirect effects of SES, through students' educational plans, reflecting the voluntary sign-up for the school-within-a-school program.

District D: Delayed Selection

District D is an urban community with several middle and high schools. We asked one of the high schools, with a freshman class of about 450, and its two feeder middle schools to participate in the study. Demographically, the segment of District D involved in the study is a mirror image of District C: both are urban, but whereas C consists mainly of working-class families with some professionals, D contains mostly professionals with a smaller proportion of working-class families. The high school in District D we studied is mostly white, with about 15 percent minority students, mainly black. In District C, more than one informant said that only the honors classes are really college-preparatory; by contrast, several sources in District D described the whole school as a college-prep program, and others noted that all non-remedial courses are geared toward college entry.

The placement process in District D differed from those in the other districts in important ways. The middle schools did not formally stratify the eighth-grade English classes. Only math was ability-grouped in eighth grade, although teachers in one school noted that the scheduling of math groups contributed to a de facto grouping in other subjects: students in algebra classes tended to have English together, and so on. On the whole, however, a student's eighth-grade ability-group position is less likely to figure in the placement process in District D as it may elsewhere. In District D, selection is essentially delayed until high school in all subjects except math.

Delayed selection emerged as a theme of the assignment process in the interviews. Counselors and department heads seemed to hold a proactive, advocacy stance toward enrolling

students in challenging academic courses. This view was best articulated by one of the junior high counselors, who claimed to pay special attention to discussing college options with minority students. In one-on-one meetings, she said,

> I almost always raise the issue of college. . . . And I'm especially aware of the effects of aspirations that schools create. . . . I'm very aware of countering low-ceiling aspirations . . . of doing affirmative action, all kinds of information for minority students, of encouraging kids to [reach their] highest potential. . . . I think we have to be very careful about the power that we have to move kids in different directions, and about what we do to aspirations. I try [to] include all the options.

While this counselor may have exaggerated her ability to raise aspirations, I found the theme of delayed selection running through the comments of many staff members in the district. When asked on a questionnaire whether her class should be considered college-preparatory, the teacher of the low-ability ninth-grade English class commented: "Please remember that Winston Churchill spent his secondary education years in remedial English classes. He was considered too slow to learn Latin and Greek." Implicit in her response was that in time, students in her remedial class will be ready for college-level work. Staff in this district seemed to hold an anti-cooling-out attitude, in contrast to what I found in District C.

At the time of ninth-grade registration, all students sign up for English 9. Later, high school staff administer a writing test for admission to the single ninth-grade honors class, which may be attempted by any student. After rating the tests, the high school teachers send the test results to eighth-grade English teachers, indicating the students who appear qualified for the honors class and soliciting comments. The high school English department chair stated that these comments are an important consideration in the selection process.

In District D, eighth-grade performance indicators such as test scores, grades, and effort appear to be the only criteria that matter. The staff's anti-cooling-out stance may serve to reduce or eliminate class and ethnicity effects and to eliminate the effects of prior coursework on subsequent placement.

Diocese E: "Ordinarily, a Consensus Decision"

Diocese E consists of the Catholic community in a metropolitan area. It proved difficult to examine the transition from eighth to ninth grade in Catholic schools, because each Catholic high school in the community draws students from forty or more different feeder schools. For the study, we selected a large, comprehensive high school and the five feeder schools that make the greatest contribution to its freshman class. This high school also enrolled about 450 freshmen. On average, students came from middle-class families, and although there was some economic diversity, 95 percent of the students were white.

The assignment process in Diocese E bears similarities to those in Districts A and D. Decisions are made at the high school; test scores figure prominently in the process; and, as in District D, the Catholic-school decision-makers appear to take seriously the counseling aspect of registration for high school. Each student is assigned to a teacher-advisor, a high school teacher who counsels him or her for all four years of high school, and who has only five or six advisees from each grade. The head of guidance at the high school reported that the teacher-advisor system was installed "to bring that personalism and individual attention to the kids." The teacher-advisor is closer to the students than an ordinary counselor would be, having a relatively small number of students to advise and meeting as a group on a daily basis.

Each February, the teacher-advisors meet with the incoming ninth graders and their parents to discuss registration for the following year and students' long-term goals. The teacher-advisors have students' past performance records at hand, including test scores and report cards, and various options are discussed. According to the principal, "Ninth graders are registered for classes by their teacher-advisor with their parents present. Ordinarily, this is a consensus decision." It was nonetheless clear that school staff play the major role in determining the outcome of this consensus, at least with respect to honors English assignment. Each year, the English department chair prepares a

list of students who may be assigned to honors English, based on placement test results. She gives the list to the teacher-advisors. Occasionally, she mentioned, parents request the honors class. This may involve students who have just missed the test score cutoff, or those who have older siblings who have passed through the school. Such requests are taken into consideration.

There is no regular contact with the feeder schools concerning English class assignment. Teacher recommendations are solicited in math and science, but not in English. Thus, the quantitative data are likely to reveal no ties between junior high rank and performance and high school placement, except as manifested in the test results.

Summary

The similarities among the districts are consistent with prior research. All the districts value test scores in the placement process, and all but Diocese E emphasize teacher recommendations. Another common element is the weakness of parent and student control over the placement process. Although parents formally controlled course assignments--in every district, parents approved and signed students' registration forms or schedules--the interviews indicated that parental discretion is rarely exercised. As other researchers have observed, parents and students almost always "choose" what school officials tell them to select (Ball, 1981). One exception to this pattern is the voluntary high-status academic program in District C.

Broadly, one may expect similar effects of placement criteria across the districts. Common emphases on placement criteria occurred even though the processes differed widely across districts. An obvious difference was the fact that decisions were made at the high school level in Districts A, D, and E, but at the junior high level in Districts B and C. Despite such differences in procedures, the criteria remain largely the same, with some notable exceptions. First, the process in District B appears fundamentally different from those in the other districts, because placement there was almost completely predetermined by the eighth-grade assignments. District D and Diocese E offer an

interesting contrast, for they offer little opportunity for prior positions to affect ninth-grade placements.

Second, whereas previous researchers have noted small, significant effects of family background on placement, these effects seem to vary among the five districts examined here. Overall, SES effects may operate through parental requests, but that seems especially likely in District C, where one program is voluntary, and where counselors seem to accept that students' futures are somewhat divided by family background. In contrast, staff in District D held an anti-cooling-out position, which may be expected to reduce the connection between family origins and educational destinations. Similarly, racial and ethnic differences in assignment probabilities may be magnified in District C and muted in District D.

Using data from tests, surveys, and school records, I will assess these predictions. Statistically, it is much easier to estimate effects that are assumed to be the same across districts than those that are allowed to differ, because modeling effects that vary by district reduces the effective sample size to the cases in the separate districts. Hence, my first task will be to model the effects of placement criteria, assuming the effects are generally similar across districts. Next, I will estimate district differences in the effects of placement criteria. Because of sample size restrictions this effort is more speculative, although it is based on patterns detected in the interviews.

ANALYSIS OF PLACEMENT CRITERIA

Table 2 lists the available indicators of placement criteria. Variables are presented in three categories: ascribed characteristics, including gender, minority status, and socioeconomic status; achieved characteristics, including performance (test scores and grades) and effort (absenteeism and time spent on homework); and organizational linkages, indicated by students' ability-group positions in eighth-grade English classes. In District D, which did not group students by ability for

TABLE 2
Variables Included in Study of Placement into Ninth-Grade Honors English (Listwise deletion of missing data; n=764)

Variable	Mean	S.D.	Description	Source
Honors English	.253	.435	Placement in ninth-grade honors or accelerated English.	School records[a]
Ascribed				
Female	.524	.500	Dummy variable: female=1, male=0.	Student questionnaire
Minority	.224	.417	Dummy variable: black or Hispanic=1, others=0.	Student questionnaire
SES	-.025	.818	Unweighted standardized composite of parents' occupation, mother's education, father's education, and home resources.	Student questionnaire
Achieved				
Reading Score	60.330	18.418	Normal-curve equivalent to national percentile scores on standardized tests administered by the school districts.[b]	School records
Math Score	64.397	20.079		School records
Writing Score	6.026	1.110	Essay test administered by researchers in the fall.[c]	Researcher-administered
Educational Plans	16.258	1.726	Years of schooling expected, as of fall of eighth grade.[d]	Student questionnaire
Don't Know Plans	.101	.301	Responded "don't know" to question on Educational Plans.	Student questionnaire
English Grade	2.997	.926	Final grade in eighth-grade English (A=4,B=3,C=2,D=1,F=0).	Student questionnaire
Homework Time	.914	1.125	Hours per week spent on homework for eighth-grade English.	Student questionnaire
Days Absent	8.652	8.462	Number of days absent during eighth grade.	School records
Organizational				
High-Ability Group	.315	.465	High-ability group in eighth-grade English.[e]	School records[a]

[a] Class lists were verified when the classes were visited to administer tests and questionnaires.
[b] Tests varied across districts, but all are reported in national percentile scales. Test in District D administered in spring of eighth grade; tests in other districts administered previous fall or spring.
[c] Test consisted of a fifteen-minute writing sample scored for informative writing and argumentative cohesion (interrater reliability=.70; see Nystrand and Gamoran, 1991). Score is mean of tests administered in fall of eighth and ninth grade.
[d] Students who responded "don't know" were scored at their within-district means, and were indicated by a dummy variable.
[e] In Districts A, C, and some schools in Diocese E, eighth-grade English was divided into separate reading and language arts classes. Students were counted as "High" if they belonged to the high group in either subject. In District D, where there were no ability groups for eighth-grade English, students were counted as "High" if they took eighth-grade algebra.

eighth-grade English, I counted students as "high group" if they were enrolled in eighth-grade algebra, which may have contributed to de facto English grouping.

In the Catholic and suburban schools, which tended to be smaller, all eighth graders were included in the study. In the small-town and urban schools, four English and four social studies classes were selected to participate, making sure to include at least one class from each eighth-grade ability-group level. Because of overlapping membership between the English and social studies classes, this selection yielded between 120 and 140 students from each of the small-town and urban schools.

In all, 1102 students participated in the fall and spring of eighth grade, and 860, or 78 percent, were followed to ninth grade. Follow-up rates varied across districts because of differences in enrollment patterns. In districts A, B, and C, where nearly all students attend the high schools included in the study, follow-up rates were around 90 percent. In District D a follow-up rate of 69.2 percent resulted from two factors: First, although the vast majority of students from the two participating middle schools enrolled in the high school we selected, some enrolled in other high schools in the district. Second, 20 students (8 percent of the total) whom we attempted to follow were unable to complete the fall ninth-grade questionnaire because they did not have the necessary study hall. Despite these losses, the students we followed are representative of those who took the standard path from a participating middle school to the high school we included.

Of 172 eighth graders we studied in the feeder schools in Diocese E, 66 attended the high school in our study, and all were included in the follow-up. This represents a follow-up rate of 38.3 percent when computed as in the other districts, but it includes the entire population of students who followed the path from the Catholic K-8 schools to this particular Catholic comprehensive high school. Thus in Districts A, B, and C, the samples represent the populations of the entire districts, but in District D and Diocese E the population represented is that of students moving through the

particular middle and high schools selected for this study. Table 3 depicts the distribution of students among the sampled districts.

Methods

I used logistic regression to estimate the likelihood of assignment to honors English as a function of ascribed, achieved, and organizational criteria. I included dummy variables for the districts, so that the analyses would reflect the effects of varying conditions within and not between districts. I conducted two sets of analyses. First, I estimated a general model that assumes the placement criteria are the same in all five districts. This model permits mean differences between districts in the likelihood of honors English placement, but does not allow district differences in the effects of criteria. I estimated five equations within this model: one that includes only ascribed characteristics, a second that adds the achieved variables, a third that also takes prior grouping into account, and two more that involve interaction terms.

The second set of analyses tests for differences across districts in the importance of selected assignment criteria. Although I was unable to consider all possible differences, I examined two that seemed particularly important: variation in the effects of prior grouping, and differential effects of family background and minority status. These differences are computed by estimating a separate slope for the particular coefficient of interest in a particular district, as explained below.

Results: General Model

The results of the general model appear in Table 4. The first column shows that although there were no significant gender differences in assignment probabilities, students from more-advantaged families are more often found in the honors level, and minority students end up there less often. These effects decline in the second column, when achieved characteristics are taken into account, but the deficit for minority students remains significant. This finding differs from analyses

TABLE 3

Description of Sample: Number of Students Studied per District, and Total

	Sampled in Eighth Grade	Followed to Ninth Grade	Percentage	After Listwise Deletion	Percentage Followed
District A	180	168	93.3	159	94.6
District B	135	122	90.3	107	87.7
District C	362	329	90.9	276	84.5
District D	253	175	69.2	156	89.1
Diocese E	172	66	38.3	64	96.7
Total	1102	860	78.0	764	88.8

TABLE 4
General Models of Assignment to Ninth-Grade Honors English Classes
(Logit regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses.
N=764 students in five school districts)

Eighth-Grade Independent Variables	Model				
	Ascribed	Achieved	Prior Grouping	"Late Bloomers"	"Class Bias"
Ascribed					
Female	.246	.066	.231	.214	.230
	(.183)	(.263)	(.276)	(.280)	(.278)
Minority	-1.291***	-.794*	-.882**	-.976*	-.925*
	(.287)	(.388)	(.412)	(.423)	(.428)
SES	.769***	.276	.323	.315	3.793*
	(.136)	(.201)	(.214)	(.214)	(1.285)
Achieved					
Reading Score		.067***	.059***	.057***	.066***
		(.012)	(.012)	(.012)	(.013)
Math Score		.052***	.041**	.041**	.042**
		(.010)	(.011)	(.011)	(.011)
Writing Score		.527***	.480**	.467**	.484**
		(.128)	(.131)	(.132)	(.130)
Educational Plans		.240*	.246*	.238*	.244*
		(.102)	(.105)	(.106)	(.107)
Don't Know Plans		-.201	.014	-.152	-.058
		(.497)	(.503)	(.522)	(.515)
English Grade		.731**	.624**	-.148	.772*
		(.189)	(.198)	(.343)	(.217)
Homework Time		.135	.121	.154	.101
		(.104)	(.107)	(.108)	(.106)
Days Absent		-.004	.000	-.009	.007
		(.019)	(.020)	(.021)	(.020)
Organizational links					
High Ability Group			1.477***	1.624***	1.526***
			(.279)	(.401)	(.285)
Interactions					
Grade=A				1.493*	
				(.626)	
Grade=A x High Group				-.287	
				(.541)	
SES x Reading Score					-.030*
					(.014)
SES x English Grade					-.384
					(.254)
Districts					
District A	1.004**	1.286*	1.233*	1.208*	1.210
	(.326)	(.457)	(.486)	(.494)	(.491)
District C	.999**	2.222***	2.262***	2.219***	2.315***
	(.313)	(.465)	(.493)	(.501)	(.506)
District D	-.657	-1.991**	-1.881**	-1.957**	-1.700**
	(.367)	(.521)	(.539)	(.546)	(.540)
Diocese E	-.045	.430	.410	.194	.377
	(.428)	(.588)	(.588)	(.601)	(.609)
Constant	-1.557	-19.85	-18.79	-16.45	-19.88

Source: Author's computations based on school records, student questionnaires, and interviews with school staff.
Note: Dependent variable is assignment to ninth-grade honors English.
*Coefficient is twice the size of its standard error.
**Coefficient is three times its standard error.
***Coefficient is four times its standard error.

of national surveys of high school students (Gamoran and Mare, 1989), and it suggests that the transition to high school may be a key point in the placement process for minority students. Among the achieved characteristics, test scores figure most prominently, but English grades and educational plans also reveal significant effects.

In addition, the districts yield interesting residual differences. District C, the urban working-class district, exhibits the highest probability of honors assignment after ascribed and achieved criteria are taken into account. This result replicates for English what Garet and Delany (1988) observed for math and science: other things being equal, students stand a greater chance of high rank in a school where the average background and achievement are lower. Other coefficients do not conform to this pattern, however, as Districts A and D, the two well-to-do districts, are opposite in their residual likelihood of honors placement.

The third column introduces the effects of prior group positions. These effects are surprisingly large, given that the interviews emphasized this criteria in only one of the five districts. Expressed as probabilities, and averaging across districts, the coefficient of 1.477 implies that a student at the average on all other characteristics, and <u>not</u> in a high group in eighth grade, would have less than a 4 percent chance of gaining access to the ninth-grade honors class. By contrast an otherwise similar student who <u>was</u> in a high group in eighth grade would have about a 15 percent chance of honors placement. These differences are portrayed in Table 5.

Because the logistic function is nonlinear, it is important to examine varied chances for students at different points on the distribution of independent variables. As Table 5 reveals, prior group assignment is particularly important for high achievers. Students who were one standard deviation above the mean on all achieved characteristics had just under a 60 percent chance of moving up to the honors level if they had not been there in eighth grade, but equally high-achieving students who were already at that level had more than an 86 percent likelihood of staying there. Table 5 also

TABLE 5

Expected Probabilities of Ninth-Grade Honors English Assignment, Conditional on Eighth-Grade Ability Group and Achievement Level

Eighth-Grade Achievement Level	Eighth-Grade Ability Group	Probability of Ninth-Grade Honors Placement
Average achievers[a]	High group	.152
Average achievers	Not high group	.039
High achievers[b]	High group	.865
High achievers	Not high group	.594
Low achievers[c]	High group	.005
Low achievers	Not high group	.001

[a] Students at sample averages on all characteristics.
[b] Students one standard deviation above the mean on all achieved characteristics.
[c] Students one standard deviation below the mean on all achieved characteristics.

shows that low achievers had virtually no chance of honors assignment regardless of their eighth-grade positions.

Interactions effects within the general model. In light of the importance of prior assignment for high achievers, what can "late bloomers" do to advance to the honors level? Does earning an A in a non-honors eighth-grade class provide an opportunity for upward mobility? This question is especially important because the worth of a given grade may depend on the class in which it was earned: an A in an average class might not be taken as seriously as an A from a high-ability class. If that is the case, students who are not members of the high-level class in eighth grade are limited in their opportunities for advancement.

To address this possibility, I created two new variables. The first is a dummy variable for whether or not students reported an A in eighth-grade English. The second is the interaction of this dummy variable with the dummy variable for membership in a high-ability eighth-grade class. These variables were added to those of the previous equations. They can be interpreted as follows: (a) significant effects of "Grade=A" indicate that any student's chances are improved by making an A; (b) significant effects of the "Grade=A x High Group" interaction indicate that students in high-level eighth-grade classes benefit more than other students from scoring A's; (c) significant effects of Grade=A coupled with negative effects of the interaction would give evidence of "late-bloomer" access to honors English, showing that grades do not help those already in the honors level, but students outside it can make up lost ground by earning an A.

The results are provided in column 4 of Table 4. They show a positive effect of Grade=A, indicating that earning an A is helpful on average. The interaction term is negative, but it is small and insignificant, particularly in comparison to the Grade=A coefficient. Thus, the findings fail to show evidence of "late bloomer" access.

Another interaction was suggested by Cicourel and Kitsuse's (1963) claim that SES does not affect placement per se, but that grades and test scores are evaluated differently for students from different backgrounds. Hence, I examined grades-by-SES and tests-by-SES interactions. The results in the last column reveal negative coefficients for both interaction variables, and the tests-by-SES coefficient is statistically significant. In addition, the main effect for SES is now significant and appears considerably larger. These results suggest a differential impact of test scores, but not in the way Cicourel and Kitsuse observed. In their study, test scores were more helpful to middle-SES than to low-SES students. Here, by contrast, test scores seem to matter less for more-advantaged students.

What does this pattern mean in substantive terms? Three comparisons are particularly instructive. For high-achieving students (those one standard deviation above the mean on all achieved characteristics), the difference in the chances of assignment to honors English for average-SES compared to high-SES students is just over 1 percent. But for students of average achievement, being one standard deviation above the mean in SES increases the likelihood of honors placement by nearly 6 percentage points. The advantage for exceptionally well-to-do students among the average-achievers is even greater: such students who are two standard deviations above the mean in SES gain over 14 percentage points in the chances of entry to an honors English class.

Results: Models of District Differences

In the second set of analyses, I explored possible differences between districts which I had predicted on the basis of the interviews. First, I added dummy variables for membership in a high group in Districts B and D and Diocese E. In this equation, whose results are displayed in the first column of Table 6, the main effect coefficient for High Ability Group represents the variable's impact in Districts A and C, and the additional terms represent the difference between the effect in A and C and the effects in B, D, and E, respectively. Recall that the interviews led me to expect an especially strong effect for this variable in District B, and no effects at all in District D and Diocese E. The

TABLE 6
Models of District Differences in Effects on Assignment to Ninth-Grade Honors English Classes (Logit regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. N=764 students in five school districts)

Eighth-Grade Independent Variables	Varied Effects of: Prior Grouping	SES and Minority Background	Prior Grouping, SES, and Minority Background
Ascribed			
Female	.279	.225	.250
	(.281)	(.278)	(.282)
Minority	-.884*	-.907	-.874*
	(.417)	(.906)	(.423)
Minority: District C		.169	
		(1.037)	
Minority: District D		-.637	
		(1.718)	
SES	.336	.397	2.397*
	(.216)	(.318)	(.982)
SES: District C		.380	
		(.485)	
SES: District D		-.829	
		(.525)	
Achieved			
Reading Score	.057***	.062***	.062***
	(.012)	(.012)	(.013)
Math Score	.041**	.043**	.041**
	(.011)	(.011)	(.011)
Writing Score	.487**	.478**	.509**
	(.134)	(.131)	(.134)
Educational Plans	.264*	.231*	.257*
	(.108)	(.106)	(.108)
Don't Know Plans	.057	-.076	-.026
	(.509)	(.514)	(.513)
English Grade	.616**	.658**	.641*
	(.200)	(.200)	(.200)
Homework Time	.106	.106	.105
	(.108)	(.107)	(.106)
Days Absent	-.002	.007	.004
	(.020)	(.020)	(.020)
Organizational links			
High Ability Group	1.695***	1.480***	1.701***
	(.356)	(.283)	(.358)
High Group: District B	1.725		1.723
	(1.208)		(1.207)
High Group: District D	-.995		-.851
	(.698)		(.696)
High Group: Diocese E	-1.630		-1.585
	(.923)		(.947)

(table continues)

TABLE 6 (continued)

Eighth-Grade Independent Variables	Varied Effects of: Prior Grouping	SES and Minority Background	Prior Grouping, SES, and Minority Background
Interaction			
SES x Reading Score			-.029*
			(.013)
Districts			
District A	2.519*	1.200*	2.531*
	(1.094)	(.513)	(1.091)
District C	3.569**	2.322***	3.604**
	(1.094)	(.507)	(1.092)
District D	.069	-1.382*	.110
	(1.153)	(.578)	(1.148)
Diocese E	2.554*	.435	2.548*
	(1.192)	(.593)	(1.199)
Constant	-20.32	-19.01	-20.88

Source: Author's computations based on school records, student questionnaires, and interviews with school staff.

Note: Dependent variable is assignment to ninth-grade honors English.

*Coefficient is twice the size of its standard error.

**Coefficient is three times its standard error.

***Coefficient is four times its standard error.

resulting coefficients are consistent with these expectations, but they are not statistically significant. The point estimates would suggest essentially a zero coefficient in Diocese E (1.695 - 1.630 = .065) and an effect less than half the size of the main effect in District D (1.695 - .995 = .700), whereas the impact of prior grouping would appear doubled in District B (1.695 + 1.725 = 3.420).[2] The combination of small sample size and variability within districts prevents us from being fully confident that the contrasts between districts are meaningful, but they are highly suggestive when viewed in the context of the interviews.

Next, I examined my prediction that the effects of SES and minority background would be somewhat larger in District C and especially small in District D.[3] In the second column, the coefficients for SES and minority background represent effects in Districts A and B and Diocese E, and additional coefficients are presented which describe the differences between these main effects and the effects in District C, on the one hand, and District D, on the other. For SES, the pattern of coefficients corresponds to expectations but the coefficients are not statistically significant. Moreover the main effect of SES remains small and insignificant as well. The coefficients for minority background in Districts C and D actually contradict expectations, but they too are insignificant. Hence, it appears that despite the anti-cooling-out philosophy in District D, ascribed characteristics played a role there as elsewhere.

The final model, presented in the third column, reintroduces the tests-by-SES interaction along with district differences in the effects of eighth-grade ability grouping. The results are similar to the earlier estimates: the effects of prior grouping may differ, but the contrasts are not statistically significant, and SES interacts with test scores to affect the likelihood of assignment to honors ninth-grade English.[4] Overall, then, the results suggest more similarities than differences among districts in the effects of assignment criteria. As the dummy coefficients at the bottom of the last column indicate, mean differences in assignment probabilities remain among the districts, with Districts D and

B (the omitted category) at lower levels than Districts A and C and Diocese E. These gaps apparently did not result from differences in assignment processes. Instead they may well reflect differences in track structures: there was only one ninth-grade honors English class in the high schools of Districts B and D, whereas the schools in the other districts each had two or more.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the quantitative analyses are mainly consistent with previous survey research, and the analyses of cross-district variation are suggestive but not conclusive. Overall, the results show significant effects of test scores and other achieved characteristics, as others have found, and they show an effect of SES that differs by student achievement level. Unlike previous work, they also indicate a direct impact of minority status on class assignment. The data further maintain the importance of prior grouping for subsequent assignment, with two possible but unconfirmed exceptions (District D and Diocese E).

As a whole, the study suggests four prominent conclusions. The first is essentially methodological: we learn more from the combination of qualitative and quantitative evidence than we would from either one alone. If this paper were restricted to the qualitative data, we would have missed the critical role of students' prior positions, at least in Districts A and C, and we may well have overstated District D's capacity to eliminate ascribed criteria from the placement process. Had we examined only the quantitative data, we would not have observed that procedural differences tend to result in similar effects of assignment criteria, as far as one can tell with these data. In general the quantitative data would not have told us much about the placement process, although we might have speculated from the results. The evidence in this paper shows that qualitative and quantitative research can enhance one another when used in combination.

A second conclusion concerns the importance of SES for access to honors English. Although an effect was anticipated, it emerged only by examining the interaction of SES with achievement, indicating that test scores matter more for less-advantaged students. Put differently, the finding means that high-SES students can overcome average test scores more readily than average-SES students in the competition for space in the honors class. How does such an effect come about? On the surface, the interviews revealed no evidence of such bias outside of District C. They did indicate, however, that parents occasionally intervene. On the basis of prior research showing differential parental involvement by SES (Baker and Stevenson, 1986; Lareau, 1987; Useem, 1991), one may speculate that the connection between SES and placement, net of achieved characteristics, occurs through the efforts of high-SES parents to move their children to higher levels in the academic hierarchy. In Diocese E, for example, the English department chair noted that parents of students who score below the cutoff-point sometimes request honors placement, and their wishes may be granted. The most likely explanation of the quantitative results is that some high-SES parents intervene to boost the placement when their children have less-than-stellar test scores.

This conclusion poses difficulties for education policymakers. On the one hand, parental involvement has been seen as desirable, particularly in the tracking process where, despite a formal role for parents and students, little control is actually exercised (Useem, 1991). On the other hand, the result of efforts to expand parental involvement may be an increase in educational inequality, if high-SES parents more often take advantage of opportunities to exercise choice.

The third conclusion is that renewed attention must be paid to differences in the assignment process for minority students and other students. Even in a district in which explicit measures were reportedly taken to counter minority disadvantage (District D), the pattern emerged. No previous survey study found a disadvantage for minority students at the secondary level, once prior achievement and SES were taken into account (Oakes, Gamoran, and Page, 1992). Yet most previous

studies have been hampered by a lack of data prior to high school entry (but see Hallinan, 1991). The results of the present study are consistent with the view that the transition to high school is a critical point for the trajectories of minority students.

A final conclusion stems from the key role of prior positions for subsequent placement in at least three and perhaps all five districts. This finding suggests a view of the tracking system as a district-wide phenomenon, enhanced by organizational connections between junior and senior high schools, rather than as a system restricted to a particular school (see Moore and Davenport, 1988, for elaboration of this view).

Perhaps one should not be surprised by the salience of prior positions. Schools, after all, are complex organizations, making selection and sorting decisions for hundreds of students each year. It is sensible that they rely in part on past judgments when renewing assignments from one year to the next. Moreover, the instability in student and staff populations and the scarcity of resources allocated to scheduling and advising often make it imperative to find shortcuts for matching students and courses (DeLany, 1991). Reliance on earlier decisions, however, has important consequences for students, giving better chances to those already in the high-ranked classes and substantially reducing opportunities for those so far excluded.

At issue is how open the system is to mobility based on student performance. Every district appeared concerned with meritocratic criteria, but some were more affected by additional considerations than others. Whereas one might expect the transition from middle to high school to be a likely point for the reevaluation of students' needs and competencies, the data show that such reconsideration is often limited by judgments made in earlier years.

Notes

[1]The larger project included three more school systems which have been omitted from this study. Two were rural districts that had no honors English class in high school, and the third was a Catholic school in which only eleven students moved from eighth to ninth grade in the same system.

[2]It would be preferable to estimate separate effects for different minority groups, but the sample was not large enough to permit that.

[3]These patterns hold up when converted to probabilities and taking the effects of the district dummy variables into account.

[4]I also estimated a "trimmed" version of the third column, omitting variables that were insignificant in the general model: don't know plans, homework, and absenteeism. I obtained the same results. In addition, I estimated models permitting a separate slope for educational plans in District C. The results were again suggestive, with a larger effect of plans in District C (.33) and smaller main effect for the other districts (.09), but neither was statistically significant. Unfortunately the size of the data set limits its capacity to support estimates of interactions.

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