Curriculum Differentiation and Comprehensive School Reform: Challenges in Providing Educational Opportunity

Donna Marie Harris, PhD

Abstract

Given the efforts of comprehensive school reform to improve the quality of educational opportunities for students by providing a standards based curriculum, this analysis examines the issue of tracking and its implications regarding curriculum differentiation. Using data from middle schools involved with the comprehensive school reform model, America’s Choice, this mixed method analysis shows a complex manifestation of curriculum differentiation where schools had multiple types of academic tracks that responded to students differences including comprehensive learning groups, subject-specific groups, and temporary learning groups used for test preparation. Although school-level reports indicated that most regular education and gifted students were exposed to the America’s Choice English Language Arts and mathematics units, special education students and English Language learners were least likely to gain access to this content. Individual teacher responses to tracking were idiosyncratic where some modified the curriculum and instructional pace by learning group ultimately impacting the amount of content exposure where those in the top learning groups were able to cover

1University of Rochester, Rochester, NY

Corresponding Author:
Donna Marie Harris, University of Rochester, 1-339 Dewey Hall, P.O. Box 270425, Rochester, NY 14627
Email: dharris@warner.rochester.edu
greater material than those in lower groups. Even though some teachers resisted tracking by addressing the classroom issues that caused differences in curriculum and instruction, tracking persisted as an entrenched practice in these middle schools through preexisting academic groups and were also replicated in new learning groups that emerged to address student academic needs related to state testing demands.

**Keywords**

ability grouping; educational equity; educational reform; middle grades

Over the years, many education reforms have sought ways to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Comprehensive school reform (CSR) has been a strategy to transform entire schools (Berends, Kirby, Naftel, & McKelvey, 2001). An explicit goal of CSR is to provide schools with the tools to increase the educational opportunities and outcomes especially for students of color and low-income youth (National Research Council, 2004). This movement began in the 1990s with a focus on promoting school-wide change with research-based practices (Rowan, Camburn, & Barnes, 2004). Wide-scale CSR was fostered by the New American Schools Development Corporation, a private nonprofit founded in 1991 that raised funds to develop 11 models of school-wide practices to promote change. Among the CSR models initially developed through this program include America’s Choice, Success for All, and the School Development Program. The 1997 passage of the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Act also aided in the scale up of these models with more than US$145 million allocated to implement these programs in high-poverty and/or low-performing settings including Title I schools (Rowan et al., 2004). To promote school-wide change, CSR designs, such as America’s Choice, give schools support through internal and external professional development, school and classroom structures and practices, and/or standards-based curricula to promote richer educational opportunities for all students.

During the initial development of comprehensive reform designs in the early 1990s, many of these models had a specific goal of either eliminating or drastically reducing tracking (Bodilly, 2001). Several CSR models including Accelerated Schools, Coalition of Essential Schools, and Success for All specifically promote flexible and heterogeneous grouping. Other models such as Modern Red School House and the School Development Program allow individual schools to determine how learning groups are organized (AIR, 2006).

Educational researchers, teachers, principals, parents, and policy makers have long debated the consequences of curriculum differentiation that occur
as result of a continuum of practices such as ability grouping and tracking. Ability grouping usually refers to the placement of elementary or middle schools students into homogeneous learning groups for subjects including reading or mathematics. These groups can exist within schools to organize students between grades and classrooms (Kulik, 2004). Tracking commonly refers to the placement of secondary school students into courses based on test scores and/or grades, academic interests and/or vocational interests (Hallinan, 1994; Kulik, 2004; Lucas, 1999; Oakes, 1985). Lucas’ (1999) research indicates that rigid tracking practices where courses are predetermined and stable during high school have been replaced by the 1980s with disparate course taking. Much prior research has shown that tracking may limit opportunities for student learning, especially for those in the bottom ranked groups (see Gamoran, 1987; Gamoran & Berends, 1987; Hallinan, 1987, 1994; Lucas, 1999; Oakes, 1985; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992; Page, 1991). The use of these practices within schools engaged in CSR may limit their capacity to provide all students with access to high-quality curriculum and rigorous instruction. Varying curricula and instructional practices that result from tracking may present a barrier in creating school-wide change especially in low-performing, high-poverty schools with inconsistent instructional practices (Balfanz, 2000). In their evaluation of the talent development high school model, a CSR model, Letgers, Balfanz, Jordan, & McPartland (2002) suggest that preexisting tracking practices limited student access to rigorous instruction and academically rich curriculum when the design was implemented. Corbett, Fancsali, Goplan, Weinbaum, and Wilson (2006) report that covert tracking via the assignment of students to teams according to achievement levels was a barrier to a school implementing the CSR design—Middle Start in Michigan. Despite efforts by school leadership to promote greater equity in access to rigorous content and instruction, there was tremendous teacher resistance to eliminating the existing team-assignment process. As many CSR models envision that all students, except the severely handicapped, are expected to be exposed to high-quality curriculum and instruction, understanding how schools and teachers allocate learning opportunities is an important issue to explore particularly in a dynamic policy environment.

This article helps to further our understanding about curriculum differentiation including tracking in a policy environment where all students are supposed to be given access to high-quality standards-based curriculum and instruction across subject areas as promoted by both CSR and high-stakes accountability with No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Although there are concerns about tracking for schools engaging in school reform, there is little focus on how learning groups are organized in schools involved with CSR and how
their existence may limit its potential benefits. In light of CSR aims, this analysis helps to understand three things. First, how are learning groups organized in middle schools involved with CSR given that schools have traditionally varied the educational experiences of students? Second, it is important to understand whether most, if not all, students gain access to standards-based content often promoted by CSR. At the same time, it is necessary to understand the implications tracking has on curricular and instructional differences that result from learning group placement. Third, why do schools continue to sort students given that tracking has been found to hamper the academic opportunities especially of those in the bottom groups? Given the inherent tension in the American educational system where schools are expected to meet the individual needs of students and, at the same time, are expected to provide equal educational opportunity (Page & Valli, 1990), it is important to understand the stratification of students within schools in the new millennium.

**Importance of Study**

This study shows how the “technology of tracking” (Oakes, 1992, p. 12) endures and often coexists with CSR and standards-based education. The technology of tracking operates through three dimensions including a structural dimension that represents the ways that schools and classrooms are organized to address the various learning needs of students. The second dimension of tracking consists of a political component that reflects “the public labels, status differences, expectations, and consequences for the academic and occupational attainment” (Oakes, 1992, p. 13). The third dimension represents entrenched norms that justify the differentiation of schooling experiences of students who vary. Given student variability, schools must then organize learning groups to adequately serve these preexisting differences.

A major concern about tracking in any form is that it threatens to detract from the aims to increase access to rigorous academic content for most students by limiting opportunity to learn for some (McPartland & Schneider, 1996). As a concept that emerged in the 1960s with the International Mathematics Survey (Dougherty, 1996; McDonnell, 1995), opportunity to learn (OTL) is concerned with understanding the structure of learning opportunities within classrooms and learning groups including the nature of topics taught and time allocated to learning (see Stevens, 1997; Tate, 2005). It is important to understand the quantity and quality of instruction for low- and high-tracked students (Hallinan, 1987) because such information provides awareness about whether.
students are actually getting access to required content as promoted by standards-based reform. The consideration of opportunity to learn for students is significant because how can educational reforms and policies make students accountable for content that they are not taught (McPartland & Schneider, 1996)?

In addition, focusing on how curriculum differentiation operates in contemporary middle schools engaged with CSR is important because it provides an understanding of how it operates at the critical level when much formal tracking begins. Middle schools hold a unique position in the K-12 system because they have the potential to compensate for skills which students may lack from elementary school and to provide the knowledge necessary for successful transition to high school.

**Conceptual Framework**

The policies and practices implemented in schools and classrooms that stratify students into learning groups and the curriculum and instructional differentiation that occurs as a result have been an important focus of educational research and reform (Gamoran, 1989; Loveless, 1999; Lucas, 1999; Oakes, 1985; Rist, 1970; Sorensen, 1970). Our understanding about the extent of and the structures associated with tracking have shifted over time (see Lucas, 1999). In the middle grades, Loveless’ (1999) documents the impact that state policy efforts in California and Massachusetts had on detracking in middle schools in the 1990s. As a result of these state policies, Loveless found that middle schools in these two states decreased the number of course levels in English, history, mathematics, and science at eighth grade. Although there is evidence that shows a reduction in the use of rigid tracking in high schools and increased efforts to detrack in middle grades, it has not been eliminated from public schools. Among 1,400 middle school principals surveyed, Petzko (2004) found that 80% used some type of ability grouping. Although tracking still exists in the new millennium, we must consider that curriculum differentiation has many varieties. Mickelson and Everett’s (2008) research shows how “neotracking” manifests where old and new forms of curriculum differentiation emerge, converge, and subvert the equity aims of North Carolina’s secondary school improvement efforts to expand educational opportunities through its Course of Study Framework. Given the focus of school reform efforts and federal policy to improve access for all students, we must consider all school and classroom structures (both formal and informal) that stratify students into learning groups and consider their role in mediating access to standards-based curriculum and instructional quality. Given the debates about tracking and the shifts in the organizations of learning groups that have resulted,
how do we capture the spectrum of practices that occur in public schools engaged in reform?

To understand tracking in a sample of America’s Choice middle schools, this analysis draws from several frameworks to describe the structural dimensions of tracking, the instructional practices that result from the structural differentiation of students into hierarchal learning groups, and the norms that sustain tracking as a strategy to address student differences.

**Structural Sources of Curriculum Differentiation**

The work of Sorensen (1970) and Gamoran (1989) suggest that there are various structural sources of differentiation that occur within and between schools. However, this reality is often obscured when researchers examining tracking use standardized metrics to describe the organization of learning groups across schools (Gamoran, 1989). Vertical differentiation as defined by Sorensen (1970) describes the broad range of learning groups used within schools and classrooms to address the differences in student preparation and academic capacity and can reflect the number of course levels that exist within schools. Drawing on Sorensen’s framework, Kelly (2007) used the 1997-1998 curriculum guides from a subsample of high schools to examine the vertical differentiation in North Carolina and found that although common courses existed as a result of state graduation requirements, the number of levels by subject varied across schools. For example, the 92 North Carolina high schools sampled had between 2 and 4 course levels in English and between 5 and 7 course levels in mathematics. Once the configurations of learning groups within schools are established, then the next step is to understand whether and how curricular and instructional differences exist between these groups.

**Practices Associated With Curriculum Differentiation**

The practices associated with tracking often lead to horizontal differentiation where curricular and instructional variation emerges among learning groups (Sorensen, 1970). The instructional and learning consequences associated with tracking are often dependent on a student’s placement in the academic hierarchy. For example, a common concern with tracking is that students placed in low-level learning groups are provided less rigorous curriculum (Hallinan, 1987; Oakes, 1985). Hallinan (1987) indicates that students in low-tracked classrooms tend to receive watered-down curriculum and spend less time on
task. Even though states promote curricular reforms, they do not eliminate the curriculum differentiation that occurs as a result of stratifying students into academic learning groups. Watanabe’s (2008) classroom observational study of two seventh-grade teachers in North Carolina who taught both regular education and gifted students shows that although regular and gifted students were exposed to similar curriculum, there were distinct instructional differences between these learning groups. On one hand, the author found that regular education students spent more time on test preparation and reading texts out loud. On the other hand, the gifted students spent less time on test preparation and were exposed to more rigorous content and authentic learning opportunities connected to the world outside the classroom. These students were also challenged to develop higher order thinking skills and provided more choice in assignments including the selection of independent reading books.

The consequences of horizontal and vertical organizational differentiation are of great concern and can be mediated by school-level conditions such as inclusiveness, electivity, selectivity, and scope. Inclusiveness reflects the ratio of slots available in specific tracks across grade levels given the student population. The process of student assignment to learning groups can have a high level of electivity where student choice dictates course placement (Sorensen, 1970). However, Hallinan (1987) indicates that elementary and middle-grade students do not exercise choice in placement. When schools control the placement of students into learning groups, this reflects a high degree of selectivity. Scope is an indicator of how track assignment limits the association of students with peers in different learning groups. Therefore, the notion of scope is concerned with the permanence of student placement. Academic tracks with high scope result in students taking courses with similarly grouped peers throughout the day and school year. Low scope grouping results in less rigid placement in courses with greater mixing of students across tracks in courses (Sorensen, 1970).

**Norms Associated With the Intractability of Tracking**

Although policies and other reform efforts have been focused on eliminating or drastically reducing tracking, it continues to exist. Loveless’ (1999) research shows that efforts to detrack were affected by institutional, organizational, political, and technical factors of schools. Institutional factors including demographic characteristics of school communities and students can affect the extent of tracking such as the racial and socioeconomic composition.
of the school. For example, Loveless found that urban schools and those serving many students of color were more likely to eliminate or reduce tracking. School-level organizational characteristics including the grades served and the size of eighth-grade student population can affect detracking efforts. Loveless established that detracking was more likely to occur when eighth-grade populations were less than 200.

Political factors including the actions of teachers and parents can derail efforts to detrack (Loveless, 1999; Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997; Welner, 1999). Welner (1999) and Oakes et al.’s (1997) research on detracking indicates that teachers and middle-class parents can actively resist detracking efforts. Welner (1999) found that teachers in his case study who were aggravated by detracking resisted these reform efforts by watering down the curriculum since they believed the needs of all students would not be best served in a classroom with a wide distribution of academic skills. He also discovered evidence of White, middle-class parents mobilizing to subvert their school district’s detracking efforts citing that the needs of gifted students were being ignored. Other research suggests that some teachers have a vested interest in preserving tracking because of the status associated with teaching students in the highest tracks (Finley, 1984; Kelly, 2004). Finley’s (1984) study of tracking in one suburban high school’s English department reveals that teachers were implicated in creating course stratification with the development of elective courses for students. Despite initial intentions that these elective courses would be heterogeneously grouped,placement in these courses was stratified. School counselors played a key role in this stratification by steering the more capable students to the academic classes and low-performing students were guided to take electives deemed as less academic. Both Finley (1984) and Kelly (2004) suggest that teachers have a stake in preserving a tracked system because teaching the higher level courses are a reward for experience and experience. Kelly’s (2004) analysis of School and Staffing Survey data shows that experienced teachers and those with advanced coursework were more likely to teach high-tracked courses compared to those without these characteristics. Finley (1984) found that teaching high-track students was not viewed as a burden compared to those teaching low-track students.

Also, a school’s technical characteristics such as the gaps in student preparation have an impact on curriculum differentiation and may promote the use of tracking (Loveless, 1999). Interviews among teachers in the Loveless study indicate the range of academic preparation and needs made it difficult to sufficiently address the variability among students especially when adequate
resources were not provided. For example, the existence of large class sizes among heterogeneously grouped classrooms can make it more difficult for teachers to meet student needs.

Entrenched norms regarding the role of schools in relationship to the diversity of skills and experiences students bring to school and the lack of professional support for teachers are two additional factors that are often ignored when reforms focus on limiting tracking. Tracking remains an entrenched practice as a result the belief that schools can have limited impact on student learning given the variation in ability levels. In addition, schools have the daunting responsibility to prepare students for different opportunities outside of K-12 schools (Oakes, 1992). The lack of professional development devoted to ability grouping when there is a desire to eliminate it, was found by Loveless (1999) to be a barrier among the schools studied in California and Massachusetts despite state policies promoting detracking.

The America’s Choice reform model provides an important context to understand recent efforts to provide standards-based content to public school students because the data will show how the existing organization of learning groups have the potential to derail the goals of standards-based education to provide a more common curriculum. The conceptual framework discussed above will guide this analysis’ organization and interpretation of data to describe the multiple tracking structures in the America’s Choice middle schools; the varying teacher instructional responses between tracked classrooms; and the norms associated with the perpetuation of tracking.

**America’s Choice Design and Grouping Practices**

To examine curriculum differentiation in the context of CSR in middle schools, I draw on data from a 5-year federally funded evaluation conducted by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) on the implementation and impact of the America’s Choice reform model. As a standards-based K-12 comprehensive school design, America’s Choice provides an excellent context to gain insight about curriculum differentiation since it serves low-performing schools seeking to improve educational quality by choosing a standards-based CSR model designed to address the needs of a diverse student body. This program has been implemented across the nation in both urban districts such as Plainfield, New Jersey; Rochester, New York; and Jacksonville, Florida as well as small rural districts.

Initiated in the 1990s, the America’s Choice design was developed by the Washington, D.C.–based National Center on Education and the Economy
Harris

(NCEE). As NCEE stated, “The America’s Choice design was a systematic school design intended to raise ALL students to World Class Standards of performance” (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2000). It is assumed that all students can reach standards except for those who are severely handicapped. The America’s Choice standards–based philosophy is explicitly articulated in one of three teaching and learning principles that guide the America’s Choice design. America’s Choice suggests that “effort produces achievement” (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2001, p. 3). Effort rather than “natural ability” is viewed as the major factor in determining student achievement. America’s Choice suggests that “labeling of students according to their assumed capacity to learn should be avoided” (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2001, p. 3). This vision proposes that the majority of students have the capacity to reach world-class standards if they focus their energy on these efforts. Improvement in student learning, according to America’s Choice, is based on exposure to subject area content and hard work. America’s Choice recognizes that schools are the catalysts which foster student engagement and effort.

To promote student effort, engagement, and outcomes, America’s Choice provides schools with new organizational structures and classroom practices. Structurally, schools adopting the model are organized into teams with block scheduling. Large schools are expected to divide students and teachers into houses to create deeper personal connections. All classrooms are expected to follow a workshop format for instruction with three components. The first component of the workshop format is a short introduction of the lesson, a mini-lesson. The second component is the work period where students do assignments individually or cooperatively with other students. During this time, teachers are expected to provide individualized student instruction with some in small groups. The third component is the closing period when students share their work and teachers wrap up the lesson. All classrooms across grades and subjects are expected to use this format.

America’s Choice also offers middle schools a standards-based English Language Arts curriculum, Readers and Writers Workshop for Grades 6 through 8. In mathematics classes, teachers are expected to supplement their curriculum with America’s Choice units, including the Foundations of Advanced Mathematics and Core Assignments. There is also a reading course, Ramp Up to Middle Grades Literacy, for incoming sixth-grade students who are 2 or more years behind in reading (see Codding, 2001). In addition, schools are expected to provide students with the time they need to achieve standards. This additional time is supposed to be provided in safety-net
initiatives including before-, during-, and after-school tutoring, Saturday assistance, and summer school.

**Method**

**Data**

From 1999 to 2004, CPRE was involved in a U.S. Department of Education–funded formative and summative, mixed-method evaluation of the America’s Choice design for middle-grade and secondary schools. Data for this analysis draw on interview data from a subsample of six America’s Choice middle schools selected to closely examine the implementation of the program longitudinally. Interview data were collected from six case study middle schools during five site visits that occurred over 3 years from 2001 to 2004. Teams of at least two researchers visited each school. During these 2-to-3-day visits, school staff including teachers, principals, school-level coaches who were responsible for implementation of the design, and guidance counselors participated in 329 semistructured interviews and classroom observations. School personnel were questioned about various aspects of the America’s Choice implementation. The majority of teachers interviews focused on English, mathematics, and reading instructors to obtain insights about the use of standards-based curriculum and instruction over 3 years. Tape-recorded interviews were conducted during planning periods, before, and/or after school.

Principal and teacher survey data used for this study were drawn from a subsample of America’s Choice schools in the states of California, Florida, Georgia, and New York that provided a larger pool of responses to triangulate themes that emerged from school-level interviews. This analysis used data from 106 America’s Choice middle school principals who responded to a survey administered during spring of 2003 and 1,956 middle school teachers and counselors who responded to a survey administered during winter 2004. As I could not link changes in tracking practices among America’s Choice schools over time, I used data from the 1999-2000 School and Staffing Survey (SASS) to make comparisons to a national sample of secondary schools operating during a similar time.

**Sample**

The six middle schools selected for visitation represented sites that had district commitment toward implementation of this program because each had
a number of their schools involved with America’s Choice. The six case study middle schools included five urban schools and one rural school. Each school initially served sixth through eighth grades with student enrollments ranging from 300 to 1,700 students (see Table 1). During the course of our study, one school (School A) was transformed to serve Grades 7 through 12. Three of the schools served more than 1,000 students; one school had a student population of 900; and the sole rural school visited served only 300 students. Four of the six case study schools had student bodies that were either predominantly African American or Latino. The other two schools had student populations that were 50% or more White. At least 50% of the students in each of the six schools qualified for free or reduced lunch with four sites being Title I schools. By the end of data collection during winter 2004, two of the middle schools were in their 4th year of implementing the America’s Choice design, and the other four were in their 3rd year of implementation.

In general, these six middle schools were low performing based on their state’s accountability system. Low student performance in three of the six middle schools compelled them to take steps to remedy the problem. During 2001-2002, two schools were designated by their respective state departments of education as needing improvement. The superintendent of one district decided that a third school in our sample would adopt America’s Choice because of low test scores. A fourth middle school was at risk of coming under state review. The spring 2001 state test scores for the other two middle schools indicated average student performance. However, the spring 2002 test scores brought a drop-in accountability status for one of these schools. As a result, all six of the middle schools had strong incentives to improve student performance and adopted the America’s Choice design to assist with improving student performance on state tests.

Analysis

A mixed-methods approach was used to understand curriculum differentiation in the America’s Choice middle schools. The qualitative and quantitative data sources were complementary and allowed for data triangulation (see Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989) that resulted in a nuanced understanding of tracking in these settings. The analysis reflects a multistage process that first began with the CPRE research team analyzing school-level data to write longitudinal cases studies for each of the six middle school sites describing the local context and implementation process. Second, the qualitative software package Atlas Ti was used to sort the interview data by predetermined evaluation themes. The third phase of analysis used the six middle school
### Table 1. Background Data Regarding America’s Choice Middle Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Urbanicity</th>
<th>School enrollment</th>
<th>Average regular class size</th>
<th>Percentage of limited English proficient students</th>
<th>Percentage eligible for free/reduced lunch</th>
<th>Student racial composition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>967</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>American Indian—0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>African</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>American—67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Asian—3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic—13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>White—17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>1,620</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>82&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>American Indian—0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>African</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>American—2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Asian—10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic—65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>White—23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>1,400</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>American Indian—0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>African</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>American—3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Asian—6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic—70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>White—19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>American Indian—0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Table 1. (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Urbanicity</th>
<th>School enrollment</th>
<th>Average regular class size</th>
<th>Percentage of limited English proficient students</th>
<th>Percentage eligible for free/reduced lunch</th>
<th>Student racial composition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School E</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>1,300</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>49(^b)</td>
<td>African American—90% Asian—0% Hispanic—0% White—10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>African American—1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>African American—40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Asian—4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic—4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>White—52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School F</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>1,120</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>African American—46% Asian—3% Hispanic—4% White—46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>White—46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2003 America’s Choice Middle School Principal Survey.

a. Data obtained from 2005-2006 school report card.
b. Data obtained from 2003-2004 report card.
c. Data obtained from Common Core of Data 2005-2006.
case studies as well as coded interview transcripts that provided a rich description of teachers’ and principals’ perceptions of student placement and the allocation of curriculum and instruction across student groups. A systematic review of the longitudinal case studies, written by CPRE’s research team, and coded interview transcripts allowed for the development of thematic charts (Ritchie, Spencer, & O’Connor, 2003) to uncover salient issues related to tracking. Interview data were analyzed across respondents within and between schools to develop coherent themes.

The fourth phase included the descriptive analysis of survey data using SPSS to generate respondent frequencies. These survey responses from America’s Choice middle principals and teachers provided supplementary information to support and contrast findings from interview data. It also allowed for connections to be made between the interview data from the six case study middle schools to a broader population using this school reform. Established analytic themes were verified by member checks including CPRE’s research team members who visited the six middle schools over the course of this study; three external reviewers; and staff from NCEE, the developer of America’s Choice.

Results: The Coexistence of Tracking and the America’s Choice Design

Despite NCEE’s desire to limit tracking in schools adopting America’s Choice, curriculum differentiation continued to exist in many of its schools. America’s Choice middle school principal surveys indicate that approximately 13% of these schools had all core subjects differentiated by students’ ability and 47% had some subjects differentiated by student ability (see Table 2). Therefore, 60% of America’s Choice middle schools sampled used some form of tracking.

The America’s Choice middle school responses about student placement were compared with a national sample of secondary schools responding to the same survey questions. During 1999-2000, almost 4,000 high school administrators answered questions about their schools as participants in the U.S. Department of Education’s School and Staffing Survey (SASS). As shown in Table 2, 18% of administrators from School and Staffing sites indicated that all core subjects were differentiated by student ability and another 50% indicated that some subjects were differentiated by student ability. Although these questions were asked in schools with different grades, chi-square statistics ($p > .10$) indicate that any differences in reports of track placement between America’s Choice middle schools and School and Staffing Survey high schools were not statistically significant. As recent studies (see Kelly, 2004;
Lucas, 1999; Petzko, 2004) show that most schools have some form of tracking in schools, we should consider the school administrator survey responses about the prevalence of tracking in the America’s Choice middle schools as underestimates of comprehensive grouping practices in these settings. Also, although 33.7% \((n = 32)\) of the America’s Choice middle principals surveyed reported that core subjects were not differentiated by student ability, at least 97 (out of 103) of the same respondents were able to provide responses to questions regarding whether specific groups of students (i.e., regular, advanced, special education, and English Language learners) were enrolled in the America’s Choice English Language Arts and mathematics curriculum.

### Tracking Via Multiple Learning Groups

Although the principal and teacher survey data provide a general description of grouping policies, the interview data provide more detailed accounts about the organizational structures used for placing students into groups and their associated labels. More importantly, interview data indicate that across the six America’s Choice case study middle schools curriculum differentiation...
existed but it did not necessarily reflect a single strategy for the stratification of students in learning groups. When asked about student placement practices, one district administrator stated, “We try to use flexible grouping at the elementary schools. We have no policy on grouping and we don’t do it [tracking].” Despite claims that no formal tracking practices were being promoted, our continuing conversation with the district administrator showed that several learning groups existed between school and grade levels.

We are pulling out [the] top in math and reading at the elementary [level] and accelerating them. In middle schools we pull out the top two sections and the bottom three together. . . . I tried every kind of grouping possible. . . . other distributions. With ours [they] are grouped to the low end [and] there is no way to do heterogeneous grouping because it would be disastrous. We have a gifted program in all levels. It is pull out in elementary [school where] gifted kids take language arts in all grades. And at high school the courses take care of that. In elementary it’s pull out and enrichment. In upper grades we’re proposing a gifted course—math or ELA. We don’t have a large number of gifted students. We have some kids who are in the 90th percentile so we can put them in with the gifted students. We get state funds for gifted; [it pays for] about half [the teacher’s] salary. (School D, spring 2001)

The comments above show that formal tracking was not always acknowledged. In School B, it was also found that the school administration initially indicated that they did not stratify students even though these data show that tracking was practiced. Despite the denials that tracking existed, examples of vertical differentiation (Sorensen, 1970) were evident in the six America’s Choice case study middle schools where multiple types of learning groups were organized for students in order to address specific academic needs. The sources of differentiation that were found in these middle schools included comprehensive learning groups, subject-specific learning groups, and temporary learning groups.

**Comprehensive Learning Groups**

Kulik (2004) suggests that how schools organize student groups vary and describing this sorting process is complicated since researchers (and school respondents) use various terms to describe this process. Interview data show that across the six America’s Choice case study middle schools, they had what Kulik (2004) describes as a “comprehensive grouping program” where students
at each grade were sorted into different academic levels (p. 159). These groups were organized hierarchically to serve the needs of high-achieving, regular education, and/or low-achieving students. Three of six case study middle schools had three academic levels for students (Schools A, B, C); one school (School E) had three academic levels in grade six and two academic levels at seventh and eighth grades; and two schools (D and F) had two academic levels across grades six through eight and one school (see Table 3).

All of the case study middle schools had learning groups for their high-achieving students who were labeled as gifted, honors, or advanced. School A had a self-contained class for its highest achieving students. However, the majority of students across the six case study middle schools were located in classes characterized as regular, standard, or general education. In some of the regular education classrooms in Schools E and F inclusion was practiced. In School E, inclusion was practiced in the four core subjects (i.e., mathematics, social studies, science, and English Language Arts) and across sixth through eighth grades with a special education teacher coteaching with the content teacher. A subset of these schools created additional groups for low-achieving students. School A had a self-contained class at seventh and eighth grade for its low-performing students, and School E had a self-contained class for its lowest performing sixth-grade students. These students received all of their instruction from one teacher who focused on reading and mathematics remediation.

Although teachers and administrators did not associate nonmainstreamed special education students and English Language learners with tracking, the case study schools had separate programs for these students. All the case study middle schools had self-contained classrooms for special education students, and all schools except School D6 had separate classrooms for English Language learners. However, given that No Child Left Behind makes schools accountable for these students, they must also be considered in current discussions about formal tracking and included as part of the academic hierarchy of learning groups in schools.

Permanency of student placement can be an issue associated with comprehensive learning groups associated with tracking when there is high scope. Students in schools with tracking characterized as high scope have limited association with peers across tracks (Sorensen, 1970). Tracking in the America’s Choice case study schools was an example of high scope since placement into these learning groups lasted for an academic year with students in tracked classrooms traveling together during the school day and sharing core academic subjects. The fact that student placement into academic groups in the case study schools tended to be permanent for an academic year or beyond is
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Number of comprehensive learning group levels</th>
<th>Content-specific groups</th>
<th>Temporary test preparation groups</th>
<th>Track placement criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>3 levels</td>
<td>• Ramp Up to Middle Grades Literacy</td>
<td>• Temporary test prep groups</td>
<td>• Grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• High achieving (self-contained)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• General education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Low achieving (self-contained)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>3 levels</td>
<td>• Ramp Up to Middle Grades Literacy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Gifted at each grade</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Reading and math scores</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• General</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Grades</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Self-contained class for students with extreme learning needs</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Teacher recommendation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>3 levels</td>
<td>• Ramp Up to Middle Grades Literacy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Gifted</td>
<td></td>
<td>• State assessment scores</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Honors</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Level 4—gifted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Regular</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Level 3—honors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>2 levels</td>
<td>• Ramp Up to Middle Grades Literacy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Gifted</td>
<td></td>
<td>• State assessment scores</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• General</td>
<td></td>
<td>• 90th percentile for gifted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Top 2 proficiency levels</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Bottom 3 proficiency levels</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>3 levels at grade 6; 2 levels at other grades</td>
<td>• Ramp Up to Middle Grades Literacy</td>
<td>• Temporary test prep groups</td>
<td>• Parental request for placement in advanced classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Advanced</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Standard with inclusion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Self-contained sixth grade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Special education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Algebra by parent request</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Pre-Algebra (all students had access)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>2 levels</td>
<td>• Ramp Up to Middle Grades Literacy</td>
<td>• 75th percentile for advanced placement on nationally normed test</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Advanced</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Teacher recommendation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• General with inclusion</td>
<td></td>
<td>• State assessment (4 or 5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Parental request</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Source: School Personnel Interviews.
a concern because it does not allow for student mobility between learning groups (Dreeben & Barr, 1988; Gamoran, 1992; Oakes, 1985; Rist, 1970). Students in middle and high school have limited mobility when scheduling issues that arise (Gamoran, 1992). As a result, it may be impossible for students to move into higher tracks when the pace of instruction varies between high and low groups in the same school. This fact makes it difficult for a student placed in a lower group to move up when he or she has not been exposed to content covered in a higher learning group (Hallinan, 1987). Placing a student in a learning group where he or she may be academically behind their peers is not an ideal situation for both student and teacher.

Content-Specific Learning Groups

Content specific grouping existed for mathematics and reading in America’s Choice schools. Student placement in mathematics classes was often associated with comprehensive learning group status in several of the case study schools. Pre-Algebra or Algebra I was offered in at least three of America’s Choice case study middle schools but access was limited to students based on test scores, teacher recommendations, and/or parent choice. Teacher interviews also indicated that in School D Pre-Algebra was offered to gifted students. Located in the same school district, Schools E and F offered pre-Algebra and Algebra I to its students but access varied in each school. In School E, every student took Pre-Algebra but Algebra I was offered to students based on achieving proficiency on the state assessment, grade point average, and teacher recommendation. Parent recommendations for Algebra I placement were also considered in School E. However, in School F, only advanced students took Pre-Algebra I in seventh grade and Algebra I in eight grade.

Content-specific groups can also mimic an academic track for those students needing additional remediation in reading. All America’s Choice middle schools beyond the 1st year of implementation including the six visited for case study were expected to implement the Ramp Up to Middle Grades Literacy program, an adolescent reading initiative. This reading program developed by NCEE, provides students confronting reading problems at sixth or seventh grade with the support to improve their literacy skills. Criteria for student placement were determined locally, however, most schools used a standardized reading assessment to place students in the course. This program was designed to accelerate the reading levels of students so that they could take on grade level content in subsequent grades. Rather than providing a subtractive (see Valenzuela, 1999) learning experience, the Ramp Up to Middle Grades Literacy program intends to accelerate the development of literacy skills necessary for doing grade level work. Although America’s Choice
did not develop this program as a formal track, in at least two of the case study middle schools, scheduling conflicts did not allow students enrolled in this program to be regrouped for other classes. Once these students were placed in this course, they stayed with peers for the entire school day traveling to other subject area classes.

**Temporary Learning Groups**

In direct response to accountability pressures examples of temporary learning groups for test preparation were found in two of the America’s Choice case study middle schools. Student performance on the state tests was used to identify students for additional assistance. In Schools A and E, students who were close to achieving proficiency on the state test were temporarily grouped into test preparation classes. In School A students that scored Level 2 (out of 4 levels) on the state tests were placed in temporary groups to prepare for the English Language Arts exam. These groups were convened in the January before the state assessment and were dissolved after its spring administration. Although math teachers in the same school did not volunteer similar information about whether they used this practice in their subject, it is possible that similar groups existed for math as well. The data do not provide information about the level of assistance provided to those not close to meeting proficiency on the state test. However, research by Lipman (2004), Diamond and Spillane (2004), and Booher-Jennings (2005) suggest that the consequences associated with high stakes testing can cause school personnel to focus narrowly on those who are closest to meeting the externally prescribed accountability goals and neglect students who are deemed to have little to no chance of meeting proficiency on the state assessment. Although these neglected students are not normally considered in our discussion regarding tracking, they represent an invisible track of students who may be experiencing the worst form of curriculum differentiation. Temporary test preparation groups that target only a select group of students for additional assistance contradict that aims of standards based reform and accountability efforts because non-targeted low-performing students are not necessarily being provided the necessary recourses to meet the goals of the state assessment.

**Track Placement Criteria: The Role of Standardized Test Scores and Student Grouping**

As the placement of students into the different learning groups was not random, there were several factors used to determine comprehensive track location. As is commonly found, standardized test scores, grades, teacher recommendations,
and/or parental requests were the primary criteria for student placement across the six America’s Choice case study schools. It is not surprising that none of the teacher or administrator interviews indicated that students played a role in their learning group placement. Although Sorensen (1970) suggests electivity as a dimension of vertical differentiation, it is not often the case that elementary and middle-grade students exercise choice regarding learning group selection (Hallinan, 1987). Although parents had the opportunity to influence student placement, these requests were rarely made in the case study schools. In most instances, placement into tracks was highly selective (Sorensen, 1970) as school personnel were the primary decision makers regarding students placement using test scores, grades, and teacher recommendations. Although test scores are commonly used as a factor in track placement, it is necessary to consider the pivotal role high-stakes tests have on student placement since the passage of No Child Left Behind.

Performance on state assessments and pressure from state accountability systems played an important role in the placement of students in learning groups. In five out of the six case study, middle schools performance on the state assessment was used to place students in learning groups. For example, students scoring at Level 3 qualified students for honors classes and scoring at Level 4 qualified students for being classified as gifted in School C, for students enrolled in School D scoring at the 90th percentile or above on the state test qualified for the gifted program; and performing at the 75th percentile or above on the state assessment in School F qualified for advanced classes.

In several schools, test scores were used in combination with other criteria such as teacher recommendations and grades. However, in two of the case study schools (Schools C and D), interviews suggest that the standardized test scores were the only criteria used for placement into learning groups. In School D, the proficiency levels related to the state tests were used to create learning groups for students and students achieving a score in the 90th percentile were designated as gifted. There should be concern about the use of state test scores (or any standardized test score) as the sole determinant of track placement as it is not recommended that the results from one high-stakes test determine student placement (see Heubert & Hauser, 1999). In addition, it is problematic that some students were targeted for test preparation assistance based on test scores as in Schools A and E while a subset of students were not given the same assistance to improve their outcomes. High-stakes tests should not be used to justify the rationing of educational resources. Preferably, this information should be used to ensure student access to quality curriculum and instruction. When certain students are excluded from obtaining
educational assistance, they have not been given adequate opportunity to learn the knowledge required on state assessments (Heubert & Hauser, 1999).

Despite the America’s Choice philosophy, students were being labeled and grouped for instruction. These groups were further reinforced by student performance on state assessments. A key concern among opponents of tracking (see Oakes, 1985; Page, 1991) is that students have differential access to curriculum and instruction. In the case of America’s Choice, did all students have access to the America’s Choice English Language Arts curriculum and mathematics units? The next section addresses this issue by considering survey and interview responses regarding the practices related to how curriculum and instruction was distributed among students based on their academic group.

Allocation of Curriculum and Instruction and Tracking

Tracking has two important implications regarding the America’s Choice curriculum. First, tracking may mediate access to this curriculum. Second, teachers’ instructional responses across learning groups may vary and influence curriculum coverage. Regarding the impact of tracking on access to the America’s Choice curriculum, survey data generally show that students across learning groups were exposed to the America’s Choice curriculum. However, teacher interviews indicate that subtle differentiation strategies also existed and suggest that curriculum coverage varied.

The majority of students classified as general/regular education and advanced/gifted/honors students were in classrooms that used the America’s Choice prescribed English Language Arts curriculum and mathematics materials. The 2003 principal survey results indicate that almost all of these schools reported that they exposed their general/regular education students to the America’s Choice English Language Arts curriculum, Writers and Readers Workshop, and the America’s Choice math units, including Foundations of Advanced Mathematics. Ninety-five percent of the America’s Choice middle schools principals indicated that regular education students were enrolled in classrooms using America’s Choice English Language Arts content (see Table 4) and 79% indicated these students were in classrooms using the America’s Choice mathematics curriculum (see Table 5). Almost 81% of middle school principals reported that advanced/gifted/honors students were in classrooms that used America’s Choice English Language Arts curriculum, and 67% indicated that these students were in classrooms using the America’s Choice mathematics units.
Principal and teacher survey results both show that these America’s Choice middle schools were least likely to expose English Language Learners and special education students to the America’s Choice curriculum. Only 57% of middle school principals indicated that English Language Learners were in classrooms that used the America’s Choice English Language Arts curriculum and 46% reported that these students were in classrooms using the America’s Choice mathematics curriculum. While 56% of principals surveyed indicated that special education students were in classrooms using the America’s Choice English Language Arts curriculum, interviews suggest that nonmainstreamed special education students did not always receive the America’s Choice curriculum.

Table 4. Percentage of Principals Reporting That the Following Groups of Students Were Enrolled in America’s Choice English Language Arts Courses Using Writers and Readers Workshop

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students by group and number of principals reporting</th>
<th>Percentage of principals reporting “yes”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regular education (n = 103)</td>
<td>95.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honors/advanced/gifted (n = 99)</td>
<td>80.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education (n = 100)</td>
<td>71.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Learners (n = 99)</td>
<td>56.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Source: 2003 America’s Choice Middle School Principal Survey.

Table 5. Percentage of Principals Reporting That the Following Groups of Students Were Enrolled in Mathematics Courses Using the America’s Choice Mathematics Curriculum (e.g., Math Core Assignments or Foundations of Advanced Mathematics Units)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students by group and number of principals reporting</th>
<th>Percentage of principals reporting “yes”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regular education (n = 102)</td>
<td>79.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honors/advanced/gifted (n = 97)</td>
<td>67.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education (n = 97)</td>
<td>55.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Learners (n = 97)</td>
<td>46.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Source: 2003 America’s Choice Middle School Principal Survey.
Arts curriculum. English Language Arts teachers reported the highest use of Writers’ and Reader Workshop compared with English as a Second Language and special education teachers. For example, 87% of English Language Arts teachers surveyed reported using the Writers Workshop compared with 41% of English as a Second Language and 41% of special education teachers. Eighty-four percent of English Language Arts teachers reported using Readers Workshop compared with 49% of English as a Second Language teachers and 42% of special education teachers. The use of America’s Choice mathematics materials was complicated by the fact that not all schools used them because they were using a preexisting mathematics curriculum such as Connected Math. However, survey responses (see Table 7) about whether they tried out the Foundations of Advanced Mathematics materials in their classes indicate that nearly 60% of mathematics teachers responded yes whereas none of the English as a Second Language teachers and 32% of special education teachers indicated they used these America’s Choice mathematics materials.

Beyond principal reports about curriculum use across subgroups of students, teachers in classrooms play an important role in mediating students’ opportunity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6. Teacher Responses Regarding Curriculum Use of America’s Choice English Language Arts Curriculum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Readers Workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Writers Workshop</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Source: 2004 America’s Choice Teacher Survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7. Teacher Responses Regarding Curriculum Use of America’s Choice Mathematics Curriculum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tried out some Foundations of Advanced Mathematics materials in class</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Source: 2004 America’s Choice Teacher Survey.
to learn through the quantity and quality of instruction. “The former determines how much of the curriculum a student is exposed to; the latter influences how much of this material is actually learned” (Hallinan, 1987, p. 45). A critique of tracking is that the curriculum varies between tracks. Those in the highest tracks tend to be exposed to rigorous academic content and lower track students are offered content with a basic-skills focus learned through seatwork and rote learning (Hallinan, 1987; Oakes, 1985, Page, 1991). Another reality confronted with tracking is that pace of instruction is faster in high tracks compared with those in lower tracks (Hallinan, 1987).

**Implications of Tracking on Teacher Responses to Student Differences**

**Curriculum Modifications and Instructional Pace**

Although the evidence from the principal and teacher survey responses indicate that most of advanced/gifted/honors students and students placed in regular education classrooms were exposed to the America’s Choice curriculum, teacher interviews indicate that subtle differentiation strategies also existed between tracks and suggest that curriculum coverage varied. Among most of the America’s Choice English Language Arts, mathematics, and reading teachers the labels associated with students’ track status were relevant to content area instruction. However, similar claims cannot be substantiated with science and social studies teachers as data among these teachers were limited.

Although the introduction of America’s Choice content provides a common curricular framework teachers used to guide instruction, individuals made decisions about whether to make modifications to the prescribed America’s Choice curriculum. The differences in instructional pace based on these academic learning grouping has implications for learning differences between tracks. An English Language Arts teacher in School B reported that all students were being taught using America’s Choice curriculum but also indicated that “It’s a range because all different teachers making decisions within their own classes.” There were four ways that teachers in the six case study middle school responded to managing instruction with a standards-based curriculum and student differences including making curriculum modifications; varying instructional pace; providing additional academic support with and without curriculum modifications; and resisting tracking by leveling the academic playing field.

Some teachers who reported using America’s Choice with all students indicated that they either modified the curriculum or varied instructional pace.
An English teacher in School A stated that she used America’s Choice English Language Arts curriculum with all students, but lower level students were given less choice in assignments, less peer editing, and less independence. In School C, an English teacher modified curriculum by adding different material. This teacher stated, “I teach two levels. I cover basically the same content with all classes but there might be different configurations.”

A seventh-grade teacher in School B explained,

Everyone gets America’s Choice, but we modify to finish as necessary. It depends on the teacher. More some than others. I do a lot. I do modify the curriculum according to the needs of my students. I create new lessons when I feel the America’s Choice [curriculum] is not addressing the needs of my students. (Spring 2003)

Adapting the America’s Choice curriculum is not necessarily a problem unless it represents watered down content that reflect low expectations for student work.

It is difficult to discern in which cases these modifications represent developmentally appropriate adjustments to address students’ needs, which teachers then incrementally adjust upward. Or did these modifications represent fixed limitations imposed by teachers? However, we cannot ignore that the existence of tracking and students’ track location have an influence on the nature of curriculum modifications. For example, the presence of tracking with standards-based reform creates the possibility that modifications viewed as developmentally appropriate for students in a low track can also reflect fixed limitations given the current reform context that requires common curriculum and test results for all. In addition to curriculum modifications, the issue of pacing must be considered simultaneously.

Although many teachers indicated that they used the America’s Choice English Language Arts and mathematics curriculum with students, some also stated that the pace of instruction varied across student learning groups. In School E, an English teacher stated that there was an expectation for all students to be exposed to the America’s Choice curriculum. However, pacing differed because “some students are exposed to more/less material than others.” Across the schools, teachers reported that students in the highest groups tended to cover more curricula. In School C, a mathematics teacher indicated that the pace differed because “some classes get it more quickly than others, because classes are grouped according to student performance on the state test” (spring 2003). An English teacher in School F stated that all regular and advanced classes used Readers and Writers Workshop.
The pace is different with Readers Workshop because they [the advanced students] read faster. We work on the papers the same amount of time. We have not gotten to a place where students can go back to folder and revise. (Spring 2003)

This evidence implies that there is sometimes a disconnection between the America’s Choice vision that students are provided sufficient time to redo work until it has met the prerequisite standard and the reality of having adequate time to cover the curriculum. The data suggest that the instructional pace was affected by teacher judgment about student learning needs associated with academic differences among tracked students in these America’s Choice middle schools. Varying instructional pace has direct implications for what students cover across tracked learning groups. As a result, students in lower track can be expected to learn less content than those in higher tracks (Hallinan, 1987). Although some may attribute the differences that occur regarding content coverage a manifestation of preexisting student differences, we must also acknowledge the role that tracking structures contribute to maintaining these group-level learning differences over time. These differences in curriculum coverage across tracks have significant consequences for students given No Child Left Behind because this policy aims at closing the achievement gap while tracking tends to exacerbate differences in learning outcomes.

Whereas some teachers reported adapting instruction pace, other teachers reported providing additional classroom support to students. A teacher in School B reported that she did not modify the America’s Choice curriculum but spent more time covering material. To meet the diverse needs of students, a teacher in School D stated, “What I do is have them come to me and I conference with them more but otherwise, I have three of those special education students and with those there is parental involvement; I know someone is working with them.” In addition to this teacher, others reported efforts to assist special education students in their classrooms. The design coach in School E reported that inclusion classrooms had a coteacher to support the needs of these students. However, when this support was not provided, teachers were not always able to adequately address learning needs of mainstreamed special education students.

Despite the presence of curriculum differentiation in the America’s Choice middle schools, some school personnel resisted tracking and the curriculum differentiation that resulted from it. In School E, there were two teachers who were opponents of tracking. A sixth-grade English teacher stated that she believed that the district was eliminating their tracking policy by the end of
the 2002-2003 school year. However, the last round of data collection in the six case study middle schools during the fall 2003 did not show that tracking was eliminated. A seventh-grade English teacher in the same school worked to level the playing field between her regular and advanced students.

I don’t believe in tracking. I know that one class is more advanced skill-wise and they have fewer attention problems, but I believe all kids can do the work. I never call the more advanced class “the advanced class.” That’s the reason I am so serious about eliminating behavior problems because I want everyone (even the ones causing trouble) to have a fair chance to learn . . . and they do, no matter what class. (Spring 2003)

This teacher believed that the biggest difference between her “advanced” and “regular” students was behavior and not ability. By eliminating distractions caused by student behavior, this teacher attempted to maintain a similar instructional pace.

At least one teacher reported that she started using heterogeneous, cooperative work groups within her classroom as a way to meet the diverse needs of students as a result of involvement with America’s Choice.

I group them heterogeneously—it really helps. They benefit from peer interaction. The quicker kids help the slower kids. I think the peer interaction is one way to get all the kids to meet the standards. (ELA teacher, School B, fall 2003)

Even a teacher who unsuccessfully used within-class ability grouping found heterogeneous grouping valuable.

Kids can’t help each other as much that way [in homogeneous ability groups]. Instead [I] grouped kids heterogeneously where they can work together if the personalities are right—some kids don’t like to help each other (English teacher, School C, fall 2003)

Efforts to meet students’ academic needs prompted various teacher responses regarding the application of the America’s Choice curriculum. In some instances, when implementing America’s Choice, some teachers attempted to modify content and varied instructional pace according to the academic level of students whereas others did not. Others used America’s Choice classroom supports including conferencing to assist students with mastering the standards-based curriculum. There are insufficient data to determine the consequences
associated with the curricular modifications and instructional pace across tracks. In addition, the data do not show whether the majority of teachers in these America’s Choice schools used these classroom supports consistently to help all students. The documented efforts of these few teachers resisting the negative consequences associated with tracking may not be enough to change the educational opportunities for the majority of students in these America’s Choice middle schools. However, the evidence shows that curriculum differentiation remains very difficult to overcome given the various demands on teachers including accountability and the entrenchment of tracking as a strategy to effectively meet students’ needs. Given that tracking exists within these schools, we cannot ignore the implication these structures have on the opportunity to learn for students across learning groups. In addition, it is necessary to understand the various forces that maintain the stratification of students through overt and covert forms of tracking.

Why Schools Differentiate Curricula?

Data from the six America’s Choice case study middle schools suggest that there were five reasons why the tracking continued used to exist. These reasons align with the technical, political, and norms of school environments (Loveless, 1999; Oakes, 1992). The first two reasons discussed are related to tracking as a response to student achievement, a technical factor of schools (Loveless, 1999). First, America’s Choice case study middle schools created these various learning groups related to students’ academic differences, especially for those with high or low achievement (Loveless, 1999). When asked about student placement in School B, the guidance counselor stated, “We try and place students according to their needs and try to keep them as much as possible in the same classes taking in consideration the personality of students and teachers and any problems between students.” Individual teachers also believed that tracking would assist with helping students to meet standards. A seventh-grade English teacher in School F stated, “Tracking will get students to meet standards. Match teachers to student levels.”

Second, although test scores can be removed as a technical barrier, this does not eliminate the salience of tracking. To get more students to take Algebra I, the principal in School F created an additional advanced eighth-grade class. In lieu of performance on the state assessment, placement in the eighth-grade advanced class was determined by teacher recommendation. Therefore, the principal removed achievement tests as a barrier to Algebra. This shows that the criteria for student placement within schools were not
absolute and can be modified based on the desire to open up more academic opportunities to students. Despite a desire to expand opportunities for students, this strategy did not eliminate tracking as a structural barrier that limited Algebra for all. While some may view this principal’s actions as a step in the right direction regarding expanding access to Algebra, this strategy reinforced tracking by aligning Algebra access with placement in the advanced track.

Third, political factors such as parent desires influenced student placement in the preexisting grouping system (Loveless, 1999). Wells’ and Oakes’ research (Wells, Hirshberg, Lipton, & Oakes, 1995; Wells & Oakes, 1996) on detracking in middle and high schools indicated that middle-class parental demands can hinder efforts to dismantle tracking, especially when administrators feared losing the resources and support from this influential constituency. Respondents in the America’s Choice case study middle schools did not report many instances where parents dictated student placement in learning groups. However, the data show that when parents intervened, it was to advocate for placement in the higher academic groups. A guidance counselor in School F suggested that “some parents think their children are more intelligent than they really are and they have higher expectations than their ability shows.” In School E, a math teacher indicated that students were placed in eighth-grade Algebra per parent request.

Fourth, and a significant reason why these schools maintained tracking was the result of deeply entrenched norms within school culture so much so that even when school leadership desired to eliminate these groups, it was difficult to change teacher practices (Oakes, 1992). Even though the principal in School A reported eliminating the practice of assigning students to three houses by ability during 2001-2002, self-contained classes for both high- and low-achieving students in seventh and eighth grades were created again in 2002-2003. Admitting that tracking existed in his school, the principal in School D wanted to eliminate it during the 2004-2005 school year. However, experience as a teacher and administrator revealed that this would be difficult to do.

Sometimes it’s a greater challenge [detracking], not as easy as you think. This is my second year as principal and I spent ten years in [a major metropolitan city] public school [system] and taught in several schools with heterogeneous groups, but it did not go off well because teachers did not know how to group. Within the classrooms I thought they were still taking kids with better abilities and putting them into ability groups in classroom. (Fall 2003)
Neither America’s Choices’ vision nor the efforts among individual principals was enough to eliminate the use of tracking as a school-wide strategy to organize students into learning groups. At times, these efforts were not strong enough to alter classroom practices associated with tracking among individual teachers.

A fifth reason why tracking persists is the lack of professional development to support teachers when they are expected to detrack classrooms. In reviewing the topics for teacher meetings prescribed by America’s Choice, there were no topics that focused on ability grouping or detracking. Loveless (1999) similarly found limited professional development opportunities to address ability grouping specifically. Even though Loveless found that 98% of California middle schools surveyed in 1994 and 91% of Massachusetts surveyed in 1995 had professional development on cooperative learning, there was significantly less professional development about tracking. For example, only 22% of California middle schools surveyed and 33% of middle schools surveyed in Massachusetts indicated that schools had professional development regarding ability grouping. Even though the majority of schools in the Loveless study received some information about cooperative learning, this is not the only strategy needed to implement detracking. This evidence suggests that tracking continues because many teachers may lack viable alternatives to this practice.

Beside the five issues discussed above, there are other factors that continue to sustain tracking practices that are not addressed by this study’s data. However, we cannot ignore that a number of studies suggest teachers may have vested interest in preserving tracking. Finley (1984) and Kelly (2004) suggest that teachers may have a desire to maintain tracking because the academic status associated with higher level courses and students. The data from the America’s Choice middle schools included in this study complement and extend the findings found in detracking studies (Loveless, 1999; Welner, 1999) to show that school personnel must address competing interests such as addressing students’ academic differences, expanding educational opportunities, satisfying the demands of parents, and transforming the entrenched norms that continue to replicate tracking.

**Conclusion**

Despite America’s Choice’s commitment to limit the use of tracking, many middle schools and teachers using this model continued to sort students academically. This fact is not surprising since Bodilly (2001) reports that in 1992 six of the seven CSR models including America’s Choice had a specific goal.
to detrack their schools. In addition, a seventh model, Roots and Wings, advocated homogeneous but flexible groups for reading and heterogeneous learning groups for all other subjects. However, by 1998 only Roots and Wings and Expeditionary Learning/Outward Bound stayed committed to the explicit push to detrack their schools. America’s Choice and the four other CSR designs used less explicit language regarding detracking because they confronted teacher resistance to this proposal. Instead, most CSR designs promoted an incremental approach to address detracking depending on school context.

This analysis shows that these America’s Choice middle schools created and maintained various types of learning groups in order to meet students’ academic needs. Although the six case study schools had comprehensive learning groups for it students, there were others that emerged in response to state accountability pressure such as those for test preparation. Many factors encourage curriculum differentiation because school personnel and, at times, parents desire to either create more academic opportunities for students or provide students with the most appropriate level of instruction (Wells & Oakes, 1996). Curriculum differentiation continues to exist because it is an embedded practice reinforced by cultural and political norms (Oakes, 1992).

The current emphasis on using state testing to monitor student progress may support the need to group students. Many of the case study middle schools used state test scores as a major criterion for student placement. In two of the six case study, schools students were grouped based exclusively on their proficiency levels on the state test. The discussion about the use of test scores to inform student selection for permanent and temporary learning groups in America’s Choice middle schools illuminates the issue of consequential test validity, that is, whether test score use is appropriate for making decisions regarding future educational opportunities for students or certifying students for graduation and obtaining an academic diploma (Smith & Fey, 2000). Smith and Fey (2000) suggest,

Establishing consequential validity requires the accumulation of evidence and rational argument that students who take the test are benefited and not harmed as a result of actions that are tied to test results. Such actions including withholding the high school diploma of a student or tracking a student into a remedial academic program. Those who employ a test in such situations are required by test standards to show evidence that the decision represents the student’s best interest, regardless of the students’ class, gender, or ethnicity. (pp. 337-338)
Therefore, the use of state assessments to inform student placement in either permanent or temporary learning groups can be a problem if these tests were not designed to be used for these purposes and if it is found that students of color and poor students had the least access to advanced, honors, and gifted courses. Although the standards of fair testing practices in education promoted by the Joint Committee on Testing Practices (2005) indicate that test consumers should not make decisions regarding promotion, retention, and placement on a single test indicator, there needs to be greater focus on this issue with more research to determine whether schools such as those in this study are making fair use of test data.

Even though schools indicated that they provided the majority of students in regular education classrooms with access to the America’s Choice curriculum, the interview data suggest that in some classrooms the content coverage and instructional pace varied based on the track level of students. Although classroom observational data are not available to measure the instructional differences between tracked classrooms, these teacher reports warrant concern about educational differences related to tracking in these middle schools. As prior research (Gamoran & Berends, 1987; Oakes, 1985; Oakes et al., 1992; Page, 1991) shows instructional pace and content coverage may differ when advanced and regular education students are sorted into separate learning groups. As a result, advanced students tend to be exposed to more content over the course of an academic year compared to peers in lower learning groups. What these data also suggest is that special education and English Language learners were not always being provided access to the regular academic curriculum provided by America’s Choice. Prior studies suggest that teachers may not expose English Language learners and special education teachers to prescribed content because many CSR models do not have a definitive strategy to address the learning needs of these students. Rather many CSR models allow individual districts and schools determine how to best serve English Language learners and those labeled for special education (Borman, Carter, Aladjem, & LeFloh, 2004; Datnow, Borman, Stringfield, Overman, & Castellano, 2003). However, this idiosyncratic strategy toward detracking does not provide the systemic support for ensuring equitable learning environments for students. Accordingly, we will continue to see inconsistent teacher responses to student differences that are exacerbated by tracked classrooms.

If it is desired to limit the use of rigid tracking efforts in schools engaged with CSR (or any other standards-based reform), then there have to be ongoing efforts to expose the deeply held cultural norms and political ideals that sustain the need for differentiation (Oakes, 1992; Weinstein, 1996). Entire
schools, not just individual teachers, must recognize the limitations of curriculum differentiation. Administrators and teachers must have an ongoing dialogue about the potential problems or benefits of grouping with a specific focus on low-performing students. Even though America’s Choice provides teacher meetings with suggested topics across subjects, no discussions were specifically designated to focus on student grouping practices. Preexisting America’s Choice teams or groups used for teacher meetings can function as inquiry groups to foster a collective discussion about tracking and detracking that get at teachers’ deeply embedded conceptions about whether they believe that student ability is fixed or developed (Watanabe, 2006). Without such discussions, Watanabe (2006) suggests that efforts to detrack schools will fail because teachers will not be able to transform their practice to adequately address students’ academic needs.

**Implications**

The introduction of standards-based curriculum for all students via CSR within schools has the potential to counteract the curriculum differentiation that occurs as a result of tracking. However, the existence of tracking in its many forms can still perpetuate educational disparities between students in low and high tracks. The differential educational experiences often resulting from tracking contradict the aims to promote a common curriculum for most students through standards based reform. In addition, tracking does not necessarily create the conditions to equalize student outcomes especially for lower performing students. As track placements are closely associated with race and socioeconomic status (Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Mickelson & Everett, 2008; Oakes, 1985), it will continue to perpetuate the educational disparities that federal and state policies are working toward eliminating. Students in the lowest tracks have the most to lose in our high-stakes accountability context when confronted with the punitive consequences regarding retention and graduation if they do not attain prescribed proficiency levels. Therefore, practitioners, reformers, and policy makers must be critical about examining the quality of curriculum and instruction provided across tracks and within classrooms. The mandates for change promoted through CSR, standards-based curriculum, and high-stakes testing do not in and of themselves create the necessary conditions to maximize the learning opportunities for all students regardless of track placement. As schools and teachers continue to grapple with attaining the goals of these policies and reform efforts, it is necessary to become acutely aware of the nature of opportunity to learn for students within and between schools and classrooms with a focus on the formal and informal tracking
structures that may subvert the intent of promoting equality of experiences and equity in student outcomes.

**Future Research**

As this study lacked systematic classroom observations across tracked classrooms, future research must collect this kind of classroom data to examine differences in content coverage and instruction across academic tracks to estimate to what degree educational opportunities vary. These new studies would examine what Porter and Smithson (2001) characterize as the “enacted” and “intended curriculum.” The “enacted curriculum” refers to the knowledge covered in a given classroom and the “intended curriculum” is the knowledge that is expected to be learned as a result of local or state standards. Such information will allow for a better understanding about how teachers determine what is taught versus what should be taught. With the addition of classroom demographic data, we should then be able to improve our understanding about how educational opportunity is distributed to students from different racial, socioeconomic, and gender groups across academic tracks. Also, given that schools are responsible for student outcomes for special education and English Language learners researchers as a result of NCLB, these student populations must be included as target populations for study.

Future research should also use a mixed-method design with multiple data sources when possible to understand curriculum differentiation. Considering that principals and teachers have different views about tracking and teachers may vary in how they deliver curriculum and instruction across tracks, a mixed-methods design provides a broader view of both structures and processes associated with teaching and learning between learning groups.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

This study was conducted under a subcontract to the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) at the University of Pennsylvania from the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) through their U.S. Department of Education, OERI, Contract No. ED-99-CO-0154. Opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of NCEE, the U.S. Department of Education, the study districts, CPRE, or its institutional members.
Notes

1. For the purpose of this study, I will use term tracking to describe the curriculum differentiation that exists in the America’s Choice middle schools.

2. The dynamic policy that may affect the allocation of learning opportunities besides comprehensive school reform includes accountability via standards-based education and high-stakes testing.

3. The Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) includes the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard University, University of Michigan, University of Wisconsin–Madison, and Stanford University. CPRE conducts research to inform educational policy and practice.

4. Approximately 329 interviews and classroom observations were conducted with school staff and district representatives in 3 years of data collection. Principals, design coaches, literacy coaches, math coaches, design coaches, math teachers, English teachers, guidance counselors, reading teachers, science teachers, social studies teachers, and district administrators were interviewed.

5. The response rate for the middle school teacher survey was 49%.

6. School D did not have English Language learners in their school population.

References


Tate, W. F. (2005). *Access and opportunities to learn are not accidents: Engineering mathematical progress in your school*. Charlotte, NC: The Southeast Regional Consortium for Mathematics and Science at SERVE.


**Bio**

**Donna Marie Harris** is an assistant professor of Educational Leadership in the Warner Graduate School of Education and Human Development at the University of Rochester. Her research focuses on ability grouping and tracking; educational reform and policy; and race and education.