

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENTS  
IN DETRACKED SECONDARY ENGLISH CLASSES

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Liberty University

2020

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2020

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how teachers described the experience of using performance assessments in detracked English classrooms. The theory guiding this study was constructivism, a psychological theory of learning based on the work of Vygotsky, which holds that learning, especially lasting, meaningful learning, results from the activity and self-organization resulting from learners' attempts to create meaning. The central research question addressed how teachers described the experiences and purposes of teaching in detracked secondary English classrooms, with additional research questions focusing on the use of performance assessments, advantages and disadvantages of detracking, professional development, and other differentiation methods in detracked English classrooms. Interviews, focus groups, and open-ended prompts were used to collect data from 14 teachers who taught in detracked English classrooms using performance assessments. I carried out data analysis through the transcendental phenomenology approach described by Moustakas (1994). Three themes emerged from the analysis: students need support, teachers need support, and performance drives learning. In answering the research questions, teachers described detracked classrooms with a wide range of readiness that makes individual attention necessary for effective differentiation, which is rewarding but time-intensive. Professional development was described as lacking in availability and quality. Performance assessments are used to promote higher-level thinking, provide choice that enhances relevancy, and drive student efficacy.

*Keywords:* detracking, performance assessment, differentiation, secondary English

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Advanced Placement (AP)

English Language Learners (ELLs)

Intermental Development Zone (IDZ)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Sociocultural Theory (SCT)

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

Achieving meaningful differentiation is key to the success of detracking implementations and performance assessments have been suggested as a useful form of differentiation for secondary English classes (Bavis, 2016; Mehan, 2015; Tomlinson, 2015). Although detracking has seen a resurgence of attention, the existing literature has presented several tensions on the efficacy of detracking and the use of performance assessments in ability-heterogeneous classrooms (Domina, McEachin, Penner, & Penner, 2015; Kim, 2005; Mehan, 2015). This phenomenological dissertation studied the experience of using performance assessments as a means of achieving differentiation in detracked secondary English classes. This chapter includes: (a) background, (b) situation to self, (c) problem statement, (d) purpose statement, (e) significance of study, (f) research questions, (g) definitions, and (h) summary.

### **Background**

Performance assessments rose in popularity as educators and researchers began to recognize the limitations of multiple-choice tests in the 1980s and 1990s (Resnick & Resnick, 1992; Shepard, 2000). Performance assessments are believed by their supporters to encourage stronger instructional techniques for teachers and improved cognitive tasks and a more authentic learning experience for students (Carless, 2015; Kim, 2005; Shepard, 2000). To best understand the context of performance assessments, researchers should have insight into the history of these practices and their advantages and disadvantages.

Detracking represents the reversal of policies that have become the norm in American high school education, with tracking entailing the division of students into separate classrooms based on their presumed ability level (Mehan, 2015). Recently, criticism of detracking has been

based on both equity and efficacy, as critics have argued that lower-track students are not granted the same resources as higher-track students and that educational stimulation in lower tracks is insufficient (Fenwick, 2015; Modica, 2015).

### **Historical Context**

Resnick and Resnick (1992) suggested in the early 1990s that high-stakes standardized testing should be reformed, arguing that educational practices flow from assessments and that assessments should therefore be built to encourage desired educational practices. Their research envisioned performance assessments as a more genuine alternative to high-stakes multiple choice tests; such assessments can be designed to support a curriculum focused on developing higher-order and critical thinking skills, and “teaching to the test” would become a worthy practice rather than a source of consternation and frustration for teachers and students alike (Resnick & Resnick, 1992). Khattri, Reeve, and Kane (1998) found that students reported performance assessments as improving a broad range of skills: writing, critical thinking, analysis, and motivational and engagement skills.

The requirement of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation that requires achievement data to be disaggregated by race has increased the visibility of racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps (NCLB, 2002). There have been a number of studies on the effect of detracking or tracking (Burriss, Heubert, & Levin, 2006; Domina et al., 2015; Figlio & Page, 2002). Burriss et al. (2006) studied an accelerated detracked mathematics tracking program in New York that pushed all eighth-grade students into Algebra I, finding significant achievement improvements for all subgroups, including minority and disadvantaged students, with initial high achievers experiencing no deterioration. However, Domina et al. (2015) studied a similar program in California and found that low-achieving students suffered from being

placed into tracks for which they were not prepared. Thus, there are tensions in the existing quantitative literature, even in studies about similar programs, indicating that there may be differences in implementation that factor heavily into the success for a given detracking initiative. Other recent research has reported anecdotal, but unambiguous, detracking successes that suggest a direction for future research, as these initiatives have focused not just on uniting students into a single-track but ensuring that the course of study is rigorous and scaffolded with a strong academic and social support system (Mehan, 2015).

### **Social Context**

Although there is widespread theoretical support for the use of performance assessment, quantitative research has been less conclusive, with the literature providing a mix of significantly positive and insignificant results. As a result, attention has been turned to meta-analyses to provide a more definitive answer and to help explain why individual quantitative studies have been mixed. Kim (2005) evaluated the consequences of performance assessments in a meta-analysis conducted via Hierarchical Linear Modeling in 148 studies, 44 of which were conducted in the United States and 104 of which were conducted in South Korea. The results showed that the use of performance assessments improved student learning outcomes, and the technique used to control for each study's local variables allowed the identification of the conditions that led to the largest benefits from performance assessments: longer implementations, their use with a homogeneous group of average-performing students, their use as an instructional tool, and their focus on cognitive learning outcomes (Kim, 2005). This study offered evidence that performance assessments are beneficial to learning outcomes, but, interestingly for this dissertation, suggested that implementations may be more difficult in ability-heterogeneous classrooms. Gözüyeşil and Tanriseven (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of 26 experimental or

quasi-experimental studies in Turkey, finding that performance assessments had a large positive effect on achievement across all subjects, with somewhat higher effects in secondary school.

Others have theorized that performance assessments benefit student learning through the emphasis of higher-level thought processes. There is widespread support for performance assessments as a formative learning tool, but there is some concern over their ability to function as effectively as a summative tool (Black, 2015; Fitzgerald et al., 2016). Bachman (2002) commented on the claim that performance assessments can predict other applications of skills, suggesting that transfer to real-life domains is too complex for such assessments to provide evidence. Particularly, task difficulty is not always conceptualized as intrinsic to an assessment task but is measured as an artifact of student performance, so the assessments have little to offer regarding students' ability to complete real-world tasks with a given difficulty (Bachman, 2002). Fox (2017) agreed that discussions continue around the utility of performance assessments for summative contexts, as well as their reliability and validity.

Carless (2015) discussed competing priorities for assessment, reframing the tension between formative and summative purposes into the idea that all assessment should be learning-oriented. Assessments must be conceptualized to incorporate genuine learning tasks, support the development of students' ability to discern quality work, and engage students with feedback (Carless, 2015). Broadbent, Panadero, and Boud (2017) carried out a case study of large undergraduate university classes in which formative assessment elements were implemented as part of summative assessment. The design included the use of exemplars, rubrics, and audio feedback, with the authors arguing that summative assessment must contain formative elements to benefit learning outcomes (Broadbent et al., 2017). For competency-based programs, performance assessment created some challenges in setting standards that are not easily

quantifiable (Fitzgerald et al., 2016). Nonetheless, supporters and practitioners argued that the process is more genuine and able to be adapted to a variety of practical learning outcomes (Fitzgerald et al., 2016).

There have also been many studies and writings on the issue of tracking and detracking. Although tracking is designed to match students with coursework that best suits their varying abilities, a long line of criticism has contended that tracking instead results in experiences that are “separate and unequal,” or an educational “caste system” (Mehan, 2015, p. 75; National Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968; Oakes, 2005). This criticism essentially draws attention to the common observation that tracking reinforces existing social hierarchies, with students seldom leaving low-ability groups once initially placed there (Mehan, 2015; Österman, 2017). Children from low-income or one-parent households, from families with unemployed parents, or from linguistic or ethnic minorities are more likely to be placed in vocational or less rigorous academic tracks, and racial minorities are overrepresented in general and vocational tracks (Campbell, 2015; Mehan, 2015). Proponents of detracking have noted the history of racial segregation in U.S. education, citing the 1976 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights’ finding that grouping by ability was the most common form of classroom segregation (Burris, 2014).

Opponents of detracking have focused on the potentially detrimental effect of detracking on student achievement and there have been a number of quantitative studies on this issue. Domina et al. (2016) used longitudinal administrative data following 24,000 California eighth-grade students and found that tracked English classes benefit high ability students through access to high-ability peers, high teacher expectations, and relatively rigorous coursework. Since low-achieving students do not have these same benefits, achievement gaps grow (Domina et al., 2016). Math detracking was found to negatively impact students of all ability levels, potentially

by enrolling students in courses for which they lacked prerequisites (Domina et al., 2016). Figlio and Page (2002) found that tracking had a positive effect on achievement for students across the ability spectrum, but more recent scholars have argued that older studies defined tracking too simplistically (Domina et al., 2016; Modica, 2015).

Proponents of detracking also offered evidence, though recent formal quantitative studies are less available. Bavis (2016) and Mehan (2015) both reported unambiguous successes with high schools featuring fully detracked classes aimed at creating and supporting high expectations for all students. Graduation rates, college attendance, Advanced Placement (AP) enrollment and scores, and achievement have improved for all students, which the authors attributed in no small part to culture changes that focus on scaffolding and differentiation (Bavis, 2016; Mehan, 2015). Burris et al. (2006) found that middle schoolers of all backgrounds and initial achievement levels who experienced a detracked mathematics curriculum had higher completion rates and grades in high school advanced mathematics courses. MacDonald (2017) and Weller (2017) implemented detracking in their science and math classrooms in order to improve equity; the practitioner-researchers continue to explore which differentiation techniques are best suited for their classrooms. Modica (2015) and Campbell (2015) focused on the racial and political dynamics of implementing detracking policies.

Detracking initiatives also sometimes encounter political obstacles that must be overcome in order to create a successful implementation (Campbell, 2015; Mehan, 2015). Furthermore, large-scale policy efforts designed to create greater ability-heterogeneity within classrooms can often have negative side effects that distort the effects of detracking itself (Domina et al., 2016).



## Theoretical Context

The study of performance assessments, detracking, differentiation, and the interaction of these concepts can be unified by the sociocultural theory (SCT) pioneered by Vygotsky (1986). This theory emphasizes the construction of knowledge as lying primarily in the social interactions co-constructed by a student and teacher (Vygotsky, 1986). According to Vygotsky, all mental activity is mediated, which is to say it is not experienced directly but mediated by symbolic and sociocultural tools such as math symbols, art, or especially language. Thus, learning is also a mediated process that inevitably occurs in a sociocultural context with sociocultural symbols and tools. By describing even basic psychological functions as fundamentally social, Vygotsky's SCT extends and goes beyond other development theories in that it requires different mental aspects such as behavior, consciousness, and social interaction to be considered part of one system.

In Vygotsky's model, learning becomes the way in which skills and knowledge are transferred from the social context to the learner's mental space, or internalized. This social context in which the skills and knowledge are transferred is often dubbed the zone of proximal development (ZPD), the space in which learning occurs that is co-constructed by the student and teacher (Walqui, 2006). In Vygotsky's words, the ZPD is "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Often, the student is someone of lesser knowledge and the teacher someone of greater knowledge, but it is certainly possible for a ZPD to be constructed by peers playing off each other's strengths; furthermore, an effective interaction in the ZPD often entails the teacher also learning from the student (Walqui, 2006).

Shabani (2016) contended that social interactions that cease before internalization may not result in learning; thus, social interactions must occur as part of an activity with a goal or purpose.

This forms a strong link between Vygotsky's SCT and performance assessments, as performance assessments provide students and teachers the opportunity to collaborate on a shared learning environment with a defined end-goal. Furthermore, the student's performance on the assessments allows the teacher to attune the ZPD more precisely to the student's needs, and the interactions between the student and teacher, especially evaluative interactions that are highly verbal, create language-based assessment and dialogue that stimulates the meta-cognition and higher forms of mental functioning that are key to internalization (Shabani, 2016).

This psychological framework describes the fundamental goals of instruction and learning as cognitive development and deep understanding that proceeds from learners' construction and self-reorganization of knowledge (Fosnot, 2005). Piaget (1987) proposed that learners attempted to maintain a coherent understanding of the world, accounting for contradictions by ignoring them, wavering between different views for different cases, or constructing a new, more capacious perspective. Vygotsky (1986) argued, however, that these concepts do not simply strike a learner who has experienced sufficient contradictions; instead, scientific concepts can only impose their logic on a learner whose understanding of their own sociological, geographical, and temporal context has sufficiently developed, and vice versa. This leads to a zone of proximal development, the level of instruction for which a child's spontaneous concepts meet the reasoning required for the targeted learning outcome (Fosnot, 2005; Vygotsky, 1986). The concept of the zone of proximal development, which will inevitably be different for each child, leads directly to the necessity of differentiation, even for classrooms that are nominally ability-homogeneous.

The idea that the most meaningful learning occurs when actively constructing, interpreting, structuring knowledge in relation to sociocultural context has been supported by continued research in biology, neuroeducation, and psychology (Shepard, 2000; Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018). This mental activity is most likely to occur in the ZPD, which is inevitably different for each child and which leads directly to the necessity of differentiation, even for classrooms that are nominally ability-homogeneous. Differentiation pioneer Tomlinson (2001) explicitly suggested performance assessments as a potentially useful strategy. Another application of developmental theory to detracking comes through the criticism that tracked classes present lower-track students with “a simplified curriculum, with limited opportunities to engage in higher order thinking” (Fenwick, 2015, p. 632). Furthermore, since tracked classes are designed to create relatively ability-homogeneous classrooms, even higher-track classrooms may lack the necessary philosophy of differentiation being necessary for presenting material for each student’s level of ability and readiness (Tomlinson, 2001).

### **Situation to Self**

This dissertation was driven by my belief that learners construct knowledge through their own attempts to create meaning in a collaborative process and context encompassing their fellow learners, teachers, and social groups (Vygotsky, 1986). To me, this suggested that educators must attempt to understand this process of constructing knowledge so that it can be better supported by curriculum and instruction, and this dissertation’s topic and approach were expressions of this viewpoint. My professional choices and philosophical assumptions were fundamentally based on a desire to create opportunity and growth for all students. In this section, I enumerate the ways in which my philosophical assumptions have motivated my pursuit of this dissertation.

## **Philosophical Assumptions**

Philosophical assumptions drove not only my interpretations of the participants' voiced experiences, but also the decisions I made as I carried out the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, it is crucial to explain the various philosophical assumptions underlying my approach to this dissertation.

**Ontological assumptions.** The role of ontology is to address “the nature of reality and its characteristics” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 20). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), as a qualitative researcher, I implicitly embraced the different realities of myself, the participants, and readers of my dissertation. My own perspective on reality was influenced by my roles and experiences as a former professional, current educator, and parent, and I recognize that my participants, who had different life experiences, did inevitably have different perspectives on reality. Participants' perspectives were collected through their participation in the study's interviews, focus groups, journals, and writing prompts, and my analysis relied on the participants' own words to acknowledge the validity of and preserve their perspectives (Moustakas, 1994).

**Epistemological assumptions.** Epistemology deals with the origin and nature of knowledge: what we know, what we can know, and how we can know it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The social constructivist viewpoint puts emphasis on the co-construction of reality by the researchers and participants and how it is shaped by individual experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this way, the epistemological assumptions of the social constructivist framework that I used in this study mirrored the constructivist learning theories of Piaget (1970) and Vygotsky (1986). One crucial role of qualitative research is its use as a method to delve into thicker, richer data than empirical evidence, moving beyond what is occurring to why and how processes are

occurring (Erickson, 2012). Given the various tensions in the literature on performance assessments and detracking, qualitative research's distinct epistemological approach was needed for these topics. Interviews are the primary data collection method for qualitative studies and are understood to be a collaborative construction of knowledge involving the researcher and participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I have also included focus groups in recognition that some important views of reality needed to be accessed within a social context that included multiple participants (Patton, 2015). I also considered that writing prompts and journals would give participants the opportunity to more privately express themselves and that the process of writing itself can indeed be a vehicle for the organization and creation of meaning (Mokhtari, 2017).

**Rhetorical assumptions.** Qualitative research is written with a voice unique to the qualitative approach; this voice is a personalized one, using first-person pronouns rather than an impersonal third-person narration (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In using this approach, I emphasized that I was not omniscient, wholly impassive, or even in pursuit of an accurate depiction of reality; instead, I was a researcher seeking to accurately report the participants' views of reality (Young, 2013). Moustakas (1994) noted that "a sharp contrast exists between facts and essences, between the real and non-real" (p. 27). In this transcendental phenomenology, I sought to reveal the essence of using performance assessments in detracked secondary English classrooms. This essence will unify the real and the non-real, a "blending of what is really present with what is imagined as present from the vantage point of possible meanings" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27). To enter a state of consciousness that allowed me to be aware of these possible meanings, I undertook the *epoché* phase of phenomenology, in which I bracketed, or identified, the biases or influences that affected my perceptions of the participants' descriptions of the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). This researcher's reflexive journal can be found in Appendix I.

**Axiological assumptions.** Axiological assumptions drive the role of values in research, and Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that qualitative research entails the acknowledgement of values and their role in the context of the study. My values relied on my conception of the essential lesson of Christianity as placing an infinitely large intrinsic value on each individual, as exemplified by the model and teachings of Jesus, especially the three parables regarding lost items—a sheep, a coin, and a son—in Luke 15 (Knight, 2006). The consequence of this value for education is that practices should be designed to support all learners at their level of need, or “zone of proximal development” described by Vygotsky (1986). The phenomenological design allowed me to reveal the axiological values of the participants and how these values contributed to their experiences of the phenomenon.

**Methodological assumptions.** I followed three fundamental aspects of the methodological assumption for qualitative research: I followed an inductive logic, I studied the topic within its context, and I used an emerging research design (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, I used the phenomenological method and collected, annotated, and re-read the transcripts of my data several times before beginning an analysis based on participants’ significant statements grouped into themes. Patton (2015) discussed that it can be difficult to find an entry point into the large amount of rich data inherent to phenomenological studies but noted that understanding the actual events can make analysis of meaning more tractable. Likewise, Creswell and Poth (2018) prescribed working with particulars before generalizations. In this study, I followed these suggestions by first building my understanding on the practices, context, and events described by the participants. I described in detail the context of the study and continually revised my list of research-based initial interview questions with questions that arose in the course of carrying out the research.

## **Constructivism**

In a broad sense, this entire dissertation was underpinned by some facet of constructivism, whether it was the psychological theory of learning pioneered by Vygotsky (1986) or the social constructivist interpretive framework, or research paradigm, that guided me in this study. The social constructivist interpretive framework is one in which individuals seek to understand their world through the development of subjective, contextual meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This is just one example of a parallel with the learning process described by constructivist learning theories and creates a cohesiveness between this study's approach and subject matter. One crucial aspect of social constructivism is that I did not start my analysis with an explanatory theory but inductively generated an explanation for why the participants described the experience of teaching with performance assessments in secondary detracked English classes the way they did (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since teachers play an obvious role in instruction, the meaning of this role for the study's participants could be an important factor in driving classroom dynamics and learning outcomes. Thus, a phenomenological research design with a social constructivist approach, in which the focus was on allowing participants to construct the meaning of the situation, was appropriate for the study. Research questions were designed to reveal the meaning of the experience for the participants, including the purpose of teaching and the perception of learning outcomes. I remained committed to the participants' meaning by using only statements or data directly sourced from the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## **Problem Statement**

The fundamental problem was the need to understand how teachers experience detracked secondary English classrooms that use performance assessments. In doing so, I developed a

better understanding of the implications of teachers' self-definition of purpose for instruction and policy, as well as the sufficiency of professional development and schoolwide support systems for detracking and differentiation initiatives. Constructivist scholars such as Tomlinson (2015) have suggested that performance assessments can be a powerful tool for creating meaningful differentiation, which detracking proponents, such as Bavis (2016) and Mehan (2015), have emphasized as key to the success of their recent secondary detracking initiatives. Therefore, it is crucial for practitioners in detracked classrooms and schools considering detracked classrooms to understand what factors teachers describe as affecting the achievement of differentiation in detracked classrooms. The existing literature presents important tensions on the efficacy of detracking and the use of performance assessments in detracked classrooms (Domina et al., 2015; Mehan, 2015). These tensions have not been resolved by the existing anecdotal or quantitative data, and existing qualitative case studies such as Modica (2015) have focused on student equity and racial dynamics rather than teachers' perspectives on instruction and learning. So in addition to the fundamental problem of understanding teachers' experiences in detracked English classrooms and the resulting implications, this study also attempted to fill the gap in the qualitative literature by giving voice to teachers, who were well-positioned to offer rich data on the instructional practices, the school environment, their perceptions, and student learning outcomes.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand how teachers describe the experience of using performance assessments in detracked English classrooms. For this study, a detracked classroom followed the definition offered by Mehan (2015): "a single course of rigorous instruction supported by an extensive regimen of academic



and social supports,” while performance assessments were based on the completion of a concrete task rather than an abstract multiple choice or written exam (Parkay, Hass, & Anctil, 2014). The theory guiding this study was Vygotsky’s social constructivism and concept of the ZPD, which highlighted the importance of finding ways to support and engage learners of varying ability and readiness levels by effectively differentiating instruction (Fosnot, 2005; Tomlinson, 2001; Vygotsky, 1986). The theory was further buttressed by Piaget’s ideas that describe learning, especially the most meaningful and lasting learning, as resulting from the activity and self-organization undertaken by learners in their attempts to create meaning (Piaget, 1970). Performance assessments may represent a more meaningful form of assessment in line with the pedagogical implications of these ideas, while lower-track courses are often argued to lack opportunities for meaningful learning (Black, 2015; Fenwick, 2015; Mehan, 2015).

### **Significance of the Study**

The broad scope of this research was that it provides many avenues for discussing its significance and context. This section presents a discussion of this study’s empirical significance, theoretical significance, and practical significance.

#### **Empirical Significance**

The existing empirical literature on detracking provides many tensions, with proponents sharing unambiguous success stories from recent initiatives (Bavis, 2016; Burris et al., 2006; Mehan, 2015; Weller, 2017), offset by recent, large quantitative studies or meta-analyses that have found significant tradeoffs for detracking and ability-heterogeneous classrooms (Domina et al., 2016; Kim, 2005; Steenbergen-Hu, Makel, & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2016). This dissertation focused on common features of the success stories, namely, the importance of intensive differentiation and a culture of high expectations, by collecting participants’ descriptions of the

purpose of teaching and their perceptions of their school's support systems for these initiatives. Previous qualitative work has focused on racial dynamics (Modica, 2015) or relative access to high quality curriculum (Fenwick, 2015), but I have given more attention to teachers' perceptions of the pedagogical advantages, disadvantages, and best practices for detracking, differentiation, and performance assessments.

### **Theoretical Significance**

This study's theoretical framework was underpinned by Vygotsky's social constructive theory of learning, which describes learning as a fundamentally social process that occurs in the context of collaboration and interaction with others (Vygotsky, 1986). Students and teachers collaboratively construct a ZPD in which learning occurs, and this zone will inevitably vary, not only by each student's ability and readiness, but also by each student's personal characteristics, life experiences, social background, and so on (Tomlinson, 2015; Walqui, 2006). Thus, differentiation becomes necessary even in a highly tracked classroom in which students' ability and academic readiness are purportedly similar (Tomlinson, 2003). In a study applying Vygotsky's theories to professional development, Shabani (2016) contended that it is crucial for these social interactions that drive learning to occur as part of an activity with a goal or purpose, and this study's focus on the use of performance assessments as a differentiation mechanism may provide insights on teachers' actual experiences with this potential link. Besides providing a purpose to the learning task, performance assessments also create an opportunity for more of the verbal, symbolic interactions, and assessments of quality that Shabani (2016) contended are key for stimulating dialogue and meta-cognition in the ZPD. Mercer (2000) drew upon Vygotsky's ZPD to introduce the intermental development zone (IDZ), which focuses exactly on this dialectic process and emphasizes the joint creation of a shared knowledge environment in a goal-

oriented task, the primacy of language and communication in generating this environment, and the importance of the correct communication strategy.

Fernández, Wegerif, Mercer, and Rojas-Drummond (2015) used the concept of the IDZ to explore scaffolding and group learning in the context of Vygotsky's theories, finding that exploratory conversation expands the overlap and upward reach of a group's joint ZPD, while disputative conversation restricts it. The ZPD must be conceptualized as a highly dynamic process, not a static area; furthermore, with an effectively constructed ZPD, a group of learners can attain concepts beyond the highest learner's individual ZPD, not just up to the knowledge of the teacher as in some earlier conceptions of the ZPD (Fernández et al., 2015). This suggests a somewhat different tack for approaching detracked classrooms than the differentiation of Tomlinson (2003), as the results of Fernández et al. (2015) put more emphasis on effective joint ZPD construction between students than highly individualized differentiation. The teacher perspectives gained by this phenomenology may shed light on these important theoretical issues, as detracked classrooms provide an opportunity for teachers to witness the construction of ZPDs between themselves and among learners of widely varying individual ability and readiness levels, which allowed for the collection of data on how teachers perceive the detracked classroom to affect the efficacy and nature of the construction of ZPDs. Additionally, the focus on performance assessments in English classrooms allowed teachers to comment on the effect of the goals and language-based evaluative dialogues that Fernández et al. (2015), Mercer (2000), and Shabani (2016) contend is critical to the social learning context highlighted by Vygotsky (1986).

## **Practical Significance**

Participants' experiences and self-definition of the purpose of teaching may have important implications for instructional practices and policy that are relevant to all three aspects of the research topic: performance assessments, detracking, and differentiation. For example, Domina et al. (2016) suggested that there is a tradeoff between the support of equity and the achievement of gifted students in English classes, while Kim (2005) found performance assessments to be less effective in ability-heterogeneous classrooms. The way in which participants view their purpose as a teacher may influence how they perceive or attempt to manage these tradeoffs in their own classrooms, and the outcome of these attempts may have implications for educational policy. Intensive differentiation is widely suggested as key to the success of detracking initiatives, but even its strongest proponents acknowledge the demanding nature of this practice and the required attitudinal shift, which can require extensive professional development (Tomlinson, 2001; Watanabe, 2006). The teacher perspectives in this phenomenology shed light on the state of professional development and administrative support for detracking and differentiation, as well as the school's culture. This culture is crucial to student success and attitudes toward learning, as students can correctly perceive teacher attitudes (Yonezawa & Jones, 2006). These issues are becoming increasingly relevant due to the continued criticism of tracked based on equity concerns (Bavis, 2016; Mehan, 2015).

## **Research Questions**

I utilized the phenomenological approach and a series of interviews, focus groups, and open-ended writing prompts, to pursue a deeper understanding of the meaning of teaching in detracked secondary English classrooms using performance assessments by focusing on the following research questions. Teachers' perspectives provided insight on how the dynamics of

Vygotsky's (1986) ZPD and Mercer's (2000) IDZ play out in detracked classrooms: how students of varying ability and readiness jointly construct ZPDs among themselves and with the teacher, how the teacher approaches the task of differentiation, and the extent to which performance assessments create the goals and stimulate the dialogue crucial for effective learning.

**Central Research Question (CRQ):** How do teachers describe the purpose and experience of teaching in detracked secondary English classrooms?

Performance assessments, detracking, and differentiation, both individually and in interaction, raise fundamental questions regarding the meaning of and purpose for education. The answers to these questions are not merely academic, as they have important implications for classroom instructional practices and decision made regarding the tradeoffs between, for example, equity and gifted student achievement highlighted by Domina et al. (2016). Teachers' attitudes are highly important to the success of detracking and differentiation initiatives (Watanabe, 2006), in no small part because students can correctly intuit these attitudes (Yonezawa & Jones, 2006). Additionally, contemporary proponents of detracking who share unambiguous success stories emphasize the importance of an accompanying culture shift to focus on differentiation and support systems, and this research question allowed teachers to describe the extent to which this culture shift has occurred (Bavis, 2016; Mehan, 2015).

The sub-questions (SQs) were as follows:

**SQ1:** How do teachers describe the instructional methods in detracked secondary English classrooms that use performance assessments?

Per classic transcendental phenomenological texts and the latest publications on qualitative research practice, understanding the meaning of an experience first requires an

understanding of process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). Therefore, this research question is designed to enable an understanding of the processes, procedures, context, and practices of the participants' instruction. Moreover, the manner in which teachers handle their classrooms and approach their students plays a huge role in the social construction of the various overlapping ZPDs and IDZs that form the classroom learning environment.

**SQ2:** What are the advantages and disadvantages of using performance assessments?

There are many possible avenues to differentiation (Tomlinson, 2003), and my focus on the use of performance assessments is in part to focus the study into a tractable problem. Furthermore, Kim (2005) identified ability-heterogeneity as a condition that reduced the effectiveness of performance assessments. Additionally, performance assessments are believed by their supporters to more effectively stimulate student learning (Kim, 2005; Watanabe, 2006) in a framework similar to what detracking supporters use to criticize the relative lack of stimulation in lower-track classes (Fenwick, 2015; Mehan, 2015).

**SQ3:** How do teachers describe the professional development, support systems outside of the classrooms, and overall school culture regarding the implementation of detracking, differentiation, and performance assessments in secondary English classrooms?

This research question emphasizes the professional development and support aspect of teachers' experiences in implementing detracking and differentiation initiatives, as well as the school environments in which these experiences occur. The context in which the phenomenon is experienced is a crucial part of describing its structure, or the conditions that drive the meaning of the experience for the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Differentiation is acknowledged even by its strongest advocates as a demanding strategy that requires a great deal of teacher training and a complete self-redefinition on the part of teachers, a process that can take up to 7 years

(Hess, 1999; Tomlinson, 2001; Valiande, Koutselini, & Kyriakides, 2011). Furthermore, common features of successful contemporary detracking initiatives include intensive extracurricular support systems and high expectations (Bavis, 2016; Mehan, 2015).

### **Definitions**

1. *Detracking* – For the purpose of this study, detracking is the placement of a school’s normal-functioning students into a single, purposefully ability-heterogeneous classroom (Mehan, 2015). In recent years, this approach has also included the stipulation that the classroom maintain at least the rigor of a previous or hypothetical honors or advanced track (Bavis, 2016; Mehan, 2015).
2. *Differentiated learning* – An effective, instructional philosophy that provides students with different avenues to acquire content (Tomlinson, 2001).
3. *Performance assessment* – The assessment of student learning outcomes through performance on completing concrete applied tasks (Resnick & Resnick, 1992).
4. *Tracking* – The physical separation of students by ability level into different classrooms (Österman, 2017).

### **Summary**

Due to concerns about the equity and efficacy of ability-grouping, it is likely that support for detracking initiatives will continue to grow (Bavis, 2016; Mehan, 2015). These initiatives and the use of performance assessments have a long historical context that has emphasized the importance of critical thinking skills and differentiation within classrooms (Mehan, 2015; Resnick & Resnick, 1992; Tomlinson, 2003). Thus, the problem of understanding how teachers describe the experience of attempting to effectively differentiate detracked secondary English classrooms through the use of performance assessments has become increasingly relevant, and

this problem formed the central research question. Despite recent literature examining the effects of detracking and ample theoretical support for performance assessments as a vehicle for differentiation, tensions in the literature necessitate a more detailed study of teaching in ability-heterogeneous classrooms, especially when using performance assessments (Domina et al., 2016; Kim, 2005). The topics of detracking, differentiation, and performance assessments have been approached and unified through the lens of the social constructivist learning theory pioneered by Vygotsky, which emphasizes the social context in which learning occurs and provides much of the study's theoretical context (Vygotsky, 1986). A general philosophy of constructivism in education also drove my research's personal context, or situation to self. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how teachers described the experience of using performance assessments in detracked English classrooms. The significance of the study came through its empirical, theoretical, and practical significance. The study provided rich data that shed more light on detracking's efficacy, a tension in the literature. It also explored the interaction of the ZPD, IDZ, and differentiation (Fernández et al., 2015; Tomlinson, 2003; Vygotsky, 1986). Finally, the study made a significant contribution in that it gave voice to teachers' descriptions of experiences and practices.



## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

This literature review provides an overview of the theory, history, and rationale behind three current trends in contemporary education: detracking, differentiation, and performance assessments. All three of these topics have risen to prominence over the past 2 decades due in no small part to their potential role in reducing or alleviating equity concerns, but they are also argued to produce better cognitive outcomes for all students. Mehan (2015) and several others argued that tracking policies create multi-tiered educational systems, often racialized, that prevent lower-ability or lower-income students from accessing the rigorous curriculum in which they could succeed if not trapped in lower-rung classes. Tomlinson (2001) presented differentiation as a philosophy and strategy with the lofty goal of effectively addressing classrooms of differing ability, a goal that becomes even more important in the context of detracking initiatives that indeed create classrooms with a wide range of student readiness and ability. A specific strategy that some other researchers and educators have suggested as a means of addressing equity is the use of performance assessments, which can overcome some of the limitations of traditional tests for disadvantaged students and offer improved cognitive learning outcomes (Guo & Jamal, 2007; Shepard, 2000). These three topics can all be approached from a theoretical standpoint using the constructivist theory of learning pioneered by Piaget (1970) and Vygotsky (1986) that is supported by the latest neuroeducation research (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018). This literature review's related literature section closes with particular attention to the confluence of these topics, especially in contemporary practice: attempts to implement differentiation in detracked high school classrooms and the use and effectiveness of performance assessments.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework serves an important role in qualitative research by providing a structure via which researchers can advance explanations for how phenomena relate to each other and other constructs, which are defined as “descriptive labels that refer to phenomena of interest” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, p. 32). In the context of this literature review, the primary phenomenon of interest is the use of performance assessments as a differentiation technique in detracked classrooms. This phenomenon involves the complex interaction of student learning outcomes with at least three other constructs: detracking, differentiation, and performance assessments, all of which likely have complex interactions with both student learning and each other. Consequently, the theoretical framework’s purpose becomes even more important as a means of understanding why and how these interactions may take place, thus guiding my path as a qualitative researcher. An understanding of detracking, differentiation, and performance assessments can be unified by the constructivist theory of cognitive learning pioneered by Piaget in the 1970s and supported by the latest contemporary research in neuroeducation.

### **Constructivist Theory of Learning**

Constructivism is a psychological theory of learning first pioneered by Piaget (1970) and Vygotsky (1986) and later supported and extended by contemporary biologists, educators, and neuroeducation researchers (Arwood & Merideth, 2017; Fosnot, 2005; Shepard, 2000; Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018). The theory’s roots grew from Piaget’s writings on the two-way biological and evolutionary interactions between the environment and organisms. In contrast to Lamarckian or Darwinian models of evolution, in which the path of evolution is determined by environmental factors or random mutations, respectively, Piaget held that organisms both create their environment and are created by their environment (Fosnot, 2005; Piaget, 1970). Similarly,

constructivism describes learning as a more complex process than stimulus-response frameworks such as behaviorism or maturationism, though Piaget's theory was originally confused as a form of maturationism, which is based on the idea of presenting learners with a developmentally appropriate educational environment (Fosnot, 2005). Constructivism differs importantly from maturationism in that it describes learning as a highly complex, non-linear process in which learning occurs through self-reorganization and the consequent emergence of new perspective rather than the linear progress through stages proposed by maturationism (Fosnot, 2005; Piaget, 1970).

Piaget's most famous insight regarded the way that the characteristics of snails' offspring changed depending on their environment, which led him to conclude that their adaptations were driven by behavioral adjustments undertaken by the snails in response to differing environments rather than the environments themselves (Fosnot, 2005). Through this lens, adaptation occurs through the stimulation of new behavior and the loss of equilibrium in an organism's underlying genetic structure; in order to resolve this imbalance, a new order spontaneously emerges in a process of self-organization, in which Darwinian natural selection occurs until a new equilibrium is reached (Capra, 2002). This idea of growth through the self-organization needed to resolve uncertainty and return to equilibrium has been applied to development, learning, and evolution, as well as robotics and artificial intelligence (Capra, 2002; Clark, 2015). Piaget (1970) himself later extended this biological concept of equilibration, a dynamic process of self-regulation that balances assimilation and accommodation, to cognition. Individuals seek to assert themselves and the autonomy of their thought by searching for new knowledge to assimilate, which sometimes results in contradictions with their existing understanding, behaviors, and thought processes (Piaget, 1978). In order to harmonize these contradictions, a process of "equilibration"

occurs similar to the biological evolution described above, with learners balancing their accommodative behaviors, which absorb and adapt to new knowledge, with their assimilative behaviors, which organize and assert a new logic for the self and world that drives the next round of craving discovery and self-actualization (Bormanaki & Khoshhal, 2017, p. 997; Piaget, 1978). Thus, the constructivist perspective on learning advanced by Piaget focuses not on skills or behaviors as the goals of instruction, but rather on cognitive development and the deep understanding that drives shifts in perspective (Fosnot, 2005). The optimal learning environment supports these aims by continually presenting learners with new contradictions and impossible situations that will stimulate the adaptation and formation of new knowledge structures (Shepard, 2000).

Vygotsky (1986) extended the constructivist model of Piaget by distinguishing between spontaneous concepts that will naturally emerge in the course of a child's development and scientific concepts that are more formal, abstract, and culturalized. Fosnot (2005) described spontaneous concepts as those that would emerge similarly for children across time and space, while the central puzzle of scientific concepts is how children, not to mention adults, can so quickly learn, or evolve, ideas that took humanity centuries to develop. Vygotsky (1978) focused on the "zone of proximal development," which is the confluence of a learner's spontaneous concepts with the logic structures needed for abstract reasoning about scientific concepts. Vygotsky described the ZPD as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Thus, Vygotsky (1978) added to the work of Piaget the importance of concept formation, that other researchers extended into the concept of scaffolding,

which entails adding support to assist a student by “controlling those elements [...] initially beyond the learner’s capability, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence” (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976, p. 90).

For Vygotsky, the most effective learning occurs when the student is drawn out to the maximum potential level of performance, which is jointly constructed with the teacher and other learners (Fosnot, 2005). However, it is important to note that Vygotsky’s ideas have been criticized by some constructivists given the seeming assumption of an absolute reality rather than constructed viewpoints, potentially putting Vygotsky closer to the sequential perspective of maturationism (Fosnot, 2005). Cambourne (1988) emphasized Vygotsky’s social constructivist conception of learning, with a teacher’s role being to: (a) focus on a student’s conception; (b) extend/challenge this conception; (c) refocus and encourage clarification; and (d) offer new possibilities to consider. Verenikina (2003) also highlighted Vygotsky’s emphasis on the role of social interaction, especially the dialectic between student and teacher, in learning; the quality of this interaction is of paramount importance in any educational application of social constructivist learning theory or scaffolding. This social dynamic coheres strongly with Tomlinson’s (2003) conception of differentiation as a strategy in which the teacher’s interactions with the students figure largely in creating a learning environment that can meet each student’s unique needs. Regardless of the exact mechanism for learning, the process is undeniably a complex series of dynamic feedback loops occurring within the context of the environment, conceptual learning target, society, and history (Alexander, Schallert, & Reynolds, 2009; Rodriguez, 2013).

Although Piaget’s work on cognition did not initially receive a great deal of attention, the “poststructuralist” psychology theory of constructivism has been considered the most current theory of learning for the past 2 decades and is supported by the latest neuroeducation research

(Arwood & Merideth, 2017; Fosnot, 2005; Parkay et al., 2014; Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018).

Neuroeducation is the intersection of cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and language, holding that each learner's unique neurobiological language learning system functions through a process that is essentially Piagetian and Vygotskian social constructivism: the integration and ordering of new meaningful information into neural networks through a process that is dependent on social interaction to acquire new concepts (Arwood & Merideth, 2017). To synthesize the constructivist perspective, learners' struggles to create meaning force shifts in perspective and central organizing principles in an unending process. The sections below summarize the application of constructivism to detracking, differentiation, and performance assessments.

### **Related Literature**

In the remainder of the literature review, I first provide background on detracking, differentiation, and performance assessments before moving to coverage of notable contemporary initiatives involving detracking and performance assessments. I eventually focus on the application of differentiation and performance assessments to detracked, or ability-heterogeneous, classrooms. This organizational structure is designed to familiarize the reader with the issues and literature and then pinpoint the gap in the literature that this study addressed.

### **Background for Detracking**

The practice of physically separating students into different classrooms of varying rigor on the basis of differences in assessed ability is technically a case of differentiation, but most academic education research outside of special and gifted education, especially that focused on the U.S. educational system, refers to the creation of entirely different classrooms and often curriculum for different ability groups as tracking (Behan, 2017; Österman, 2017). The practice of tracking is generally acknowledged as having begun in the Progressive Era in the 1890s to

1920s, when immigration and mandatory school attendance created a larger and more diverse school population (Oakes, 2005). Progressive reformers hoped to support their students' future roles in society via academic, general, and vocational tracks. Currently, U.S. tracking in elementary often entails smaller instructional groups within an ability-heterogeneous classroom, while middle schools and high schools introduce different levels of classroom rigor in each subject (e.g., AP, honors, regular, or remedial). Even nominatively “detracked” high schools, which would feature a single, rigorous tracks for most classes, often feature some degree of tracking for upperclassmen as AP classes figure more largely in the schedule of college-bound students.

Discussion of detracking in this study refers primarily to “the educational practice of eliminating ability groups and, instead, offering all students a rigorous course of study supported by academic and social supports” (Mehan, 2015, p. 75). Detracking is the reversal of policies that split, or track, students into physically separate classrooms by ability group; although tracking is technically a form of differentiation or addressing the varying readiness and ability levels of students, differentiation typically refers to the adjustments necessary in ability-heterogeneous classrooms (Österman, 2017; Weller, 2017). According to Österman (2017), educational policy is ultimately downstream of the fundamental political decisions that prioritize and balance the competing goals of education, with Christian democratic governments tending to enact tracking-promoting policies, though the reasons for this are unclear. One clear political tradeoff between tracking and detracking seems to come in the form of equality of educational opportunity versus equality of income; tracking places students on defined paths earlier in their academic careers, amplifying the effects of family characteristics on educational attainment, but tracking also provides lower-track students with practical educational opportunities that can

translate into higher-paying employment upon graduation (Österman, 2017). Although vocational programs remain an important piece of educational systems in many countries, the continuation of economic development and information technology has emphasized high-skilled occupations at the expense of lower-skilled and blue-collar work (Autor, 2015). This dynamic helps to explain the reexamination of tracking's consequences for educational, socioeconomic, and racial equity (Bavis, 2016; Modica, 2015).

Tracking policies are designed to put students in classrooms and learning experiences that are best-suited to their varying abilities, with even modern school-reform initiatives in countries such as Australia introducing different tracks of English curricula with varying rigor (Fenwick, 2015). However, critiques of these initiatives from a social justice and equity perspective have been forceful, ranging from Fenwick (2015) observing a lack of rigor and effective teaching for schools and classrooms using the lower minimum standards to Campbell (2015) describing tracking as “controversial, ineffective, and racist” (p. 1). Mehan (2015) called tracking an educational “caste system” (p. 75). Thus, much of the impetus for detracking initiatives revolves around critical theory that explains tracking as a consequence of social structures and criticizes its role in reinforcing existing social hierarchies (Österman, 2017). Burriss (2014) pointed to the 1976 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights’ finding that grouping by ability was the most common cause of classroom segregation. Much of this criticism centers around the racial dynamics of tracking (Campbell, 2015; Mehan, 2015; Modica, 2015). Schools do not sort only by achievement, as students who score the same on standardized tests are often placed into different tracks within the same school, and research has shown that race and family background have a significant effect on course placement (Oakes, 2005; Riegle-Crumb & Grodsky, 2010). Children from households with low incomes, a single parent, and linguistic or ethnic minorities are more



likely to be placed in vocational or less rigorous academic tracks (Campbell, 2015; Mehan, 2015). English language learners (ELLs) and students in special education are often most highly concentrated in lower track classes designed for basic skills practice and remediation in order to allow the attainment of minimum standards per standards-based reforms such as NCLB; these classes frequently feature narrow and even scripted curricula focused entirely on test preparation and almost devoid of authentic learning experiences (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Speiglmán, 2004; Watanabe, 2006). Since critical thinking and personal meaning are highly productive in the development of language skills, a lack of exposure interesting curriculum would be particularly detrimental for students struggling to communicate effectively in English (Larmer, 2015).

According to supporters of detracking, the placement of disadvantaged students into lower tracks is a problem not only due to the resulting lack of social mobility but also due to the reduced effectiveness of less rigorous or less relevant coursework (Bavis, 2016; Oakes, 2005). Although tracking was introduced with the purported aim of presenting students with appropriately challenging material and school officials have expressed a wariness of presenting less-prepared students with too little academic rigor, in practice, tracking has tended to exacerbate achievement gaps by dampening achievement for students in the lower track and boosting achievement for students in higher tracks (Campbell, 2015; Diamond & Lewis, 2015; Gamoran, 2009). One reason for this seems to be the negative impact of reduced expectations on students in lower tracks based on perceived ability levels, which can lead to lower track students not being pushed to achieve at their full potential (Diamond & Lewis, 2015). Catholic schools, which place higher expectations in lower tracks than public schools, feature less of an achievement gap between tracks than public schools, though it is also likely that this result is driven in part by the higher socioeconomic status of a lower track private school student, whose

family is paying tuition, versus a lower track public school student (Gamoran, 2009). Mayer, LeChasseur, and Donaldson (2018) observed 26 teachers and found that teachers communicated lower expectations for lower track classes.

Many researchers suggested differences in curriculum and instruction as a primary driver of the achievement gap between higher and lower track students; at a minimum, the insufficient intellectual stimulation of lower track classes is viewed as exacerbating the achievement gap (Fenwick, 2015; Gamoran, 2009; Mehan, 2015; Valli & Buese, 2007). Fenwick (2015) analyzed the four English tracks introduced by Australia and complains that “lower-track classes experience a simplified curriculum, with limited opportunities to engage in higher order thinking” (p. 632). Researchers have judged remedial English reading classes to have a low cognitive demand and to lack complex cognitive activities that require the application of skills (Valli & Buese, 2007), and districts with large numbers of African American, Latino, or low-income students have historically shown a greater tendency to create curricula from commercial test preparation materials that are focused on low-level skills and scripted instruction (Achinstein et al., 2004; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001).

At its core, criticism of tracking is based on the constructivist suggestion that the most effective, lasting learning occurs when students construct conceptual understandings of new knowledge through activities that call on higher order thinking, with the indictment of tracking contending that the simplistic curriculum endemic to lower-track classrooms is less effective at stimulating positive student learning outcomes (Parkay et al., 2014; Tomlinson, 2001). Watanabe (2006) concluded that standards-based reform in North Carolina did little to improve the quality of instruction or curriculum in lower track classrooms because teachers continued to conceptualize learning as a sequential, rather than constructive, process, which led to a continued

focus on basic skill mastery and a deficit of more meaningful content. Nonetheless, a defense of tracking policies could also be made on constructivist grounds, as tracking is philosophically based on the idea that students are most likely to succeed when instruction is matched to student skill level and cognitive need (Domina, 2014).

### **Background for Differentiation**

Tomlinson (2003) described the “philosophy of differentiation” as the proposal that students’ traits and preexisting knowledge profoundly affect how they learn; consequently, effective teaching actively plans and adapts to understand and address each student’s needs to enable each student to progress “as far and as fast as possible on a learning continuum” (pp. 1-2). The within-classroom differentiation that Tomlinson (2003) described in her numerous influential publications on the subject is fundamentally distinct from the across-classroom differentiation of tracking policies. While within-classroom differentiation embraces the challenge of an ability-heterogeneous classroom, tracking seeks to avoid or reduce the necessary intensity of within-classroom differentiation by creating relatively ability-homogeneous classrooms (Tomlinson, 2003). Sousa and Tomlinson (2018) reviewed the latest neuroeducation research and used it to support the basic principles of differentiation and reinforce the idea that teachers should modify content, learning processes, products that demonstrate what students have learned, and their attention to students’ feelings and emotional needs.

On a biological and structural level, all brains develop uniquely and thus process incoming information into patterns and meaning in unique ways; this processing is enhanced through divergent, creative thinking that occurs when students find new ways to approach problems (Arwood & Merideth, 2017; Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018). Emotions affect learning through the release of chemicals into the brain when an activity, positively, creates interest, or,

negatively, is overshadowed by anxiety, and socialization also plays a crucial role in enhancing learning (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018). Ultimately, moving information from working memory to long-term memory depends on the construction of meaning, and differentiation allows more potential pathways for students to create this meaning (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018). According to neuroeducation pioneers Arwood and Merideth (2017), effective differentiation does not simply mean presenting students with different approaches, as neuroeducation rejects the idea of multiple intelligences put forward by Moran and Gardner (2018) in favor of emphasizing readiness and the construction of meaning through associations and symbols. Almost all learners process information more quickly through visualization, so most attempts at creating kinesthetic learning activities are really just versions of visual learning unless they involve blindfolds (Arwood & Merideth, 2017). Since many of the mechanisms theorized for differentiation to positively impact learning outcomes are not directly tied to student ability and are instead related to helping students create meaning, differentiation techniques should also benefit advanced students in higher ability tracks (Shepard, 2000).

Tomlinson (2001) maintained that there is no universal set of practices for differentiation and instead contended that successful differentiation begins from the teacher's genuine care for individual students. Teachers must recognize that students differ along four important traits, readiness, interest, learning profile, and affect, and that these differences change how students' largely homogeneous basic needs manifest themselves in very different ways based on factors such as the student's gender, culture, life experience, talents, interests, cognitive development, and support systems (Tomlinson, 2003; Valiande et al., 2011). Instruction can be differentiated by student readiness through the devising of supports for all learners (Tomlinson, 2001). To address varying student interests, teachers are required to make lessons relevant to the interests

of their students, which either entails discovering these interests or involving students in the daily running of the classroom (Subban, 2006). Even struggling learners have passions and talents that allow them to explore, express themselves, and engage in the learning process (Subban, 2006; Tomlinson, 2003). Differentiating based on learning profile and affect often entail varied learning activities that empower students to productively choose the ways in which they learn best (Subban, 2006). For different students, this will represent group work, a focus on particular skills, or independent research projects (Subban, 2006). Although Arwood and Merideth (2017) emphasized readiness and the meaning-making rather than multiple intelligence theories, there is a common agreement among differentiation practitioners and theoreticians that authentic learning activities are desirable.

Roy, Guay, and Valois (2013) proposed a somewhat less broad definition for differentiation, describing it as a varied and adapted teaching approach matching students' different needs through instructional adaptation and academic progress monitoring. The conception of Roy et al. (2013) is thus more specific and perhaps more easily quantifiable than the general prescriptions of Tomlinson (2003), but it is also a more reactive, rather than proactive, version of differentiation in that it is based primarily on ongoing assessment and decisions based on these assessments (Faber, Glas, & Visscher, 2017). Nonetheless, a key feature of differentiation as proposed by both Tomlinson (2003) and Roy et al. (2013) is that choices are made based on knowledge about students.

Creating curricula and instruction tailored to each individual student's needs is recognized to be an overwhelmingly large task that would quickly produce teacher burnout; instead, an effective differentiation philosophy stems from an underlying genuine care for students that manifests, from an instructional perspective, as adaptability and responsiveness

(Tomlinson, 2001). Assessment in a differentiated classroom comes from giving students the opportunity to demonstrate their unique strengths (Subban, 2006). This is in line with the dialectical dynamic emphasized by Vygotsky's social constructivism and the contemporary cognitive psychology consensus that socialization, and the teacher's role in socialization, play crucial roles in learning (Shepard, 2000). The fact that the theory of within-classroom differentiation emphasizes genuine care and responsiveness thus introduces another potential critique of tracking strategies that seek to reduce the need for or intensity of within-classroom differentiation. The goal of tracking could, admittedly rather ungenerously, be paraphrased as reducing the need for the responsiveness at the heart of differentiation and thus ironically deprive even advanced students in higher learning tracks of the superior cognitive learning framework advanced by differentiation proponents (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018; Valiande & Koutselini, 2008). In a constructivist framework, knowledge is constructed through a learning process unique to each individual, and the child-centered approach of differentiation enables this construction of knowledge rather than the mere transfer of skills and information (Good & Brophy, 2003; Koutselini, 2006; Tomlinson, 2003).

### **Background for Performance Assessments**

Performance assessments, a type of alternative assessment, were pioneered by medical schools and allow students to demonstrate their learning through the completion of a concrete task related to their learning rather than through a traditional multiple choice or written examination (Shepard, 2000). Many educators and researchers have observed that educational practices, on the part of both teachers and students, tend to flow from assessment practices; thus, assessments should better reflect the learning outcomes a curriculum is meant to produce and be designed to develop higher-order and critical thinking skills (Resnick & Resnick, 1992). The

importance of assessment in the context of differentiation is further underscored by the observation made by Wormeli (2006) that “in a differentiated classroom, assessment guides practice. Instructional decisions are based not only on what we know about curriculum, but also on what we know about the specific students we serve” (p. 20). Performance assessments can come in many forms, and, as with several other educational trends, health education is a field that has been a leader in developing assessment based on determining competence in skills and domains (Fitzgerald et al., 2016). Examples of performance assessments might include applied engineering projects in science or mathematics classes, demonstrating competence in health care skills, or a portfolio of written works in English or history classes (Carless, 2015). Williams (2014) discussed some of the advantages and disadvantages of traditional assessments versus performance assessments for certification: traditional assessments are not as objective as advertised, can negatively impact student motivation, and may lack relevance to the practice of the desired learning outcomes.

Performance assessments are indeed believed to encourage improved cognitive tasks and a more authentic learning experience for students, with performance assessments often representing an authentic learning experience themselves (Resnick & Resnick, 1992). Authentic learning experiences have been shown to increase student achievement across all grade levels (Parkay et al., 2014), and recent meta-analyses of performance assessments in the United States, South Korea, and Turkey have shown significant positive effects on student achievement (Gözüyeşil & Tanriseven, 2016; Kim, 2005). Most interestingly for this study, Kim (2005) used hierarchical linear modelling to identify what conditions led to the largest benefits from performance assessments, one of which was their use with a homogeneous group of average-performing students. Performance assessments have the additional advantage of reducing

students' test-related anxiety (Contreras-Soto, Véliz-Campos, & Véliz, 2019), a particularly important concern given the problems of achievement gaps and self-inflicted testing bias (Guo & Jamal, 2007; Shepard, 2000; Williams, 2014).

Shepard (2000) discussed evidence from cognitive psychology indicating that the most meaningful learning occurs as students take an active role in the construction, interpretation, and structure of new knowledge in relation to prior knowledge. Black (2015) presented a threefold framework for considering formative assessments: the formative and summative roles of assessment, the ways that different assessment practices develop students as learners, and the way new assessment practices challenge teachers to re-consider their roles. Since the most successful detracking initiatives seem to feature a widescale culture shift in schools (Bavis, 2016; Mehan, 2015), shifts in assessment practices may be one way to drive these shifts. Although alternative assessments are not always well-suited to certification or summative assessments, their utility as a formative tool is in little doubt. Carless (2015) reframed this tension into the idea that all assessment should be learning-oriented, incorporate genuine learning tasks, support the development of students' ability to discern quality work, and to engage with feedback. Since a culminating, summative assessment should reflect the essential understandings of the course, it is already good practice for formative assessments to be aligned with the summative assessment (Wormeli, 2006).

The best pedagogical and assessment techniques promote critical thinking by presenting students with task-based problem-solving activities, with performance assessments comparing favorably to traditional assessment techniques, especially those focused on the memorization of facts (Kim, 2005; Shepard, 2000). Even in memorization-based areas, students need to organize and give meaning to the facts in order to retain the information effectively (Shepard, 2000).



Similar to detracking and differentiation, constructivist cognitive theory underpins much of the support for performance assessments. To learn is not just to receive information but to interpret and organize it within the context of previous knowledge, a process that is highly uncharacteristic of the regurgitation of facts on multiple choice tests. Performance assessments force students to acquire, structure, and use new information in order to solve complex problems (Kim, 2005; Resnick & Resnick, 1992; Shepard, 2000).

### **Detracking Initiatives**

In 2001, the United States Congress and President George W. Bush reauthorized the Secondary Education Act in piece of legislation known as NCLB. This reauthorization mandated that each state create a set of standards and measure the progress of nearly all students toward meeting these standards (NCLB, 2002). Criticisms of NCLB have included complaints that it has narrowed curriculum, promoted scripted lessons, and encouraged an excessive focus on state testing performance (Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Palmer & Snodgrass Rangel, 2010). In the context of detracking, the most salient feature of standards-based reforms like the NCLB is the typical requirement that student achievement scores be disaggregated by demographic (NCLB, 2002). This disaggregation has highlighted racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps, leading to numerous initiatives to address these gaps, including initiatives based on detracking (Campbell, 2015; Mehan, 2015). Although political concerns, especially those related to parents of higher-track students concerned about a loss of rigor, can present obstacles for implementing detracking, a number of recent implementations have reported success in their attempts to introduce rigorous, college-preparatory or advanced curricula, for all normal-functioning grade-level students (Bavis, 2016; Campbell, 2015; Mehan, 2015).

Evanston Township High School, a diverse district north of Chicago with 41% low income students, shifted from four tiers of classes based on eighth-grade achievement data to fully detracked freshman English, history, and biology for almost all students in 2010 (Bavis, 2016). This initiative aimed to create expectations high enough for students to excel in AP courses, and teams of teachers developed the new curriculum based on skills that would be needed for this goal in junior and senior years (Bavis, 2016). The results of the initiative have been very successful, with Evanston going from 17% of students achieving 3 or better on AP exams to 30% post-detracking; the information needed to test for statistical significance is not reported, but the percentage of “honors” students achieving at this level declined only slightly, from 76% to 74%, supporting the contention and experiences of Burriss (2014), that students falling behind due to their placement in lower tracks can go on to thrive in higher tracks (Bavis, 2016). Just as Tomlinson (2001) suggested that differentiation requires a fundamental change in philosophy, Bavis (2016) observed that the removal of the “honors” label from classes positively impacted student affect and efficacy by transforming the “honors” distinction into a status earned through self-driven output rather than a label passively received before doing any work.

Mehan (2015) shared the results from five detracked schools in California serving low-income, high-risk neighborhoods with intensive college-preparatory coursework. The Preuss School on the University of California-San Diego (UCSD) campus provides intensive college preparation classes exclusively for low-income students from unsafe poor neighborhoods. The school offered more academic time, including 18 additional days compared to public schools and extensive tutoring availability from university students, in order to support the combined complexities of students’ circumstances and the school’s rigor (Mehan, 2015). Preuss is ranked among the top public schools in both California and the country, with 82% of its graduates

enrolling at colleges. Gompers Preparatory Academy is another school associated with UCSD that operates in a community with a high crime rate. After failing to meet NCLB targets for 6 years in a row, the school reformed as a charter featuring a college-prep curriculum, uniforms, university tutors, and intensive teacher training, which has resulted in consistent improvements across all measures of educational success and, since 2011, 100% attendance at 4-year or community college. In Los Angeles, the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA) collaborated with the UCLA Community School, serving about 1,000 students, mostly Latina/o, English learners, and economically disadvantaged. Students are supported with an 88% bilingual staff, a teacher retention rate of 91%, multiage instruction, and interdisciplinary courses, which has resulted in the 4-year college enrollment rate rising from 31% in 2012 to 55% in 2014. The University of California-Berkeley partnered with the California College Preparatory Academy, which serves disadvantaged families and boasts a 100% acceptance rates into 4-year colleges and standardized test achievement rates for black students that are double those of the surrounding county. The University of California-Davis School of Education also worked with a charter school designed to target underserved communities and mitigate barriers to college attendance, with its strategy including the analysis of student response to complex instructional tasks and modifying instruction on the basis of this analysis (Mehan, 2015).

Although four of the five schools Mehan (2015) presented are charter schools and all have the significant financial and professional resources that come with being associated with major universities, he contended that the primary feature enabling their success is their increased flexibility to restructure and reculture their schools without having to confront the political opposition that can otherwise neuter or derail detracking initiatives. Some strategies to manage political obstacles to detracking include: (a) first removing low-track classes, which has the

effect of visibly improving achievement for their former students; (b) gradually creating heterogeneous classes by granting parents the opportunity to enroll their children in more demanding courses; (c) using both academic and social scaffolding techniques to support struggling learners; (d) using achievement data to counter emotional prejudice against detracking with objective evidence; (e) recognizing the difficulty of implementing differentiation practices and offering strong professional development; and (f) responding to parental concern with proactive, honest, and consistent communication about the progress of detracking initiatives (Burriss & Garrity, 2008; Mehan, 2015). Although these schools have access to resources that many do not, Mehan (2015) suggested that their success in producing high achievement scores and college attendance rates is mainly due to their flexibility to restructure and reculture their schools without having to confront the political obstacles noted by Campbell (2015). Common to all of these schools is a focus on intensive academic support, both in the form of providing extra weekend tutoring and with strategies that focus on analyzing student responses to complex tasks and modifying instruction accordingly (Bavis, 2016; Mehan, 2015).

### **Differentiation and High Expectations as Keys to Detracking Success**

Just as Tomlinson (2001) suggested that differentiation requires a fundamental shift in how teachers approach teaching, moving away from arbiters or dispensaries of knowledge to “organizers of learning opportunities,” Mehan (2015, p. 16) and Bavis (2016) both pointed to changes in underlying philosophy as essential to the success of their detracking initiatives. Although detracking has been explored as an avenue for addressing achievement gaps for some time, the successful contemporary initiatives described by Bavis (2016), Burriss (2014), and Mehan (2015) are distinct from historical patterns in that (a) they are based on the idea that lower ability students need more rigor and do not include any reduction of rigor for higher tracks; and

(b) they place an intense focus on the problem of how to support this increased rigor through differentiation techniques. Key strategies outlined by Mehan (2015) include the analysis of student response to complex instructional tasks and the consequent modification of instruction. As differentiation requires such personalized adaptation and flexibility on the part of teachers, schools that grant teachers more autonomy may be more successful in supporting differentiated instruction as a detracking strategy (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2009).

Weller (2017) described her experience detracking high school geometry classrooms, improving student outcomes via implementations of response-to-intervention, standards-based scaffolding, and student self-assessment, all designed to enhance instructional differentiation within the classroom. Modica (2015) followed a somewhat less successful detracking implementation of high school English classrooms as a participant-observer at a mixed-race suburban charter school; contra the underlying philosophical changes common to the initiatives described by Bavis (2016) and Mehan (2015), the “honors” distinction remained in effect, and a divisive, racialized dynamic emerged in the classroom. Modica (2015) did not mention the teacher’s attempts to differentiate, noting a lack of professional development support for the pilot program; nonetheless, Modica (2015) contended that learning outcomes were enhanced, with higher-level students forced to clearly explicate their reasoning and lower level students drawn into analytical discussions.

Valiande et al. (2011) studied teachers’ differentiation techniques and their effect on students’ achievement on literacy tests, finding a significant, but small, positive effect. This study confirmed the beneficial impact of differentiation in mixed ability classrooms for normal-functioning students of all socioeconomic backgrounds, adding to the wide literature on the effect of differentiation on talented or disabled students (Tieso, 2005; Valiande et al., 2011).

Core characteristics of effective differentiation include: instruction based on constructivist learning theories, a hierarchical scaffolding of learning activities, students' active participation in the learning process, a variety of activities, personalized support systems, continuous evaluation of students' achievement and the learning process, and the incorporation of students' interests, ability, readiness, and biographies into instruction (Faber et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2003; Valiande et al., 2011). This long, diverse list of teaching techniques, few of which are straightforward to unilaterally implement, suggests that achieving effective differentiation is a demanding process for educators. Indeed, implementing effective differentiation programs depends a great deal on the training given to the teacher in order to impart the needed skills and techniques and support the teacher's redefinition of the role in the classroom to one supporting students' self-construction of knowledge, a process that can take up to 7 years to develop in a teacher (Hess, 1999; Tomlinson, 2001; Valiande et al., 2011). Fomenting teacher support for any educational initiative is essential to its success given that individual teachers in classrooms represent the ultimate decision-makers regarding how educational policy filters down from administrators; furthermore, innovative techniques from high-performing teachers may in turn filter up into building or district-wide policies (Cohen, 1990).

In addition to differentiation, high expectations may represent another key to the success of detracking initiatives, as students seem to learn the material that is presented to them. Using a dataset that encompassed the entire state of Florida in 1999-2004, Tyson and Roksa (2016) found much higher mathematics achievement and course attainment when presented with a detracked or two-level course sequence rather than options that include remedial courses in high school, even for students who would have normally not been placed in honors or standard tracks. Students with the same eighth-grade achievement scores had much higher achievement if placed

into honors courses (Tyson & Roksa, 2016). Most dramatically, students who earned an A in remedial courses had lower attainment than students with a D in general Algebra I (Tyson & Roksa, 2017). Although students may become disengaged if classes are too challenging, Allensworth, Nomi, Montgomery, and Lee (2009) found that rigorous courses have the reverse effect of increasing student engagement. When lesson plans are diluted with the aim of allowing all students in mixed-ability classes to follow, the worst students still often end up behind, and the better students are not prepared to move on to more advanced coursework (Gamoran & Weinstein, 1998). When teachers emphasize active learning methods and differentiate assignments for different achievement levels, detracking can work well; however, adjusting lessons for relevance rather than high standards results in low rigor and little intellectual stimulation (Rubin, 2008).

### **Empirical Evidence for the Effect of Detracking**

While some studies, such as that of Figlio and Page (2002), have suggested that tracking has a positive effect on achievement for all students, critics have argued that many studies have defined tracks and its effects simplistically. Betts and Shkolnik (2000) suggested that schools adjust resource allocation when tracking, such as putting lower-achieving students into smaller classes, which can offset negative impacts from less rigorous and stimulating curricula. To overcome these issues, Domina et al. (2016) measured five distinct ways in which schools implement tracking and their interacting effects on achievement in a large study following 24,000 California eighth-grade students. California attempted to universalize eighth-grade Algebra I in 2008, and Domina has published many studies, mostly discouraging, on the results of this effort. In this 2016 study, the dimensions of tracking measured were: the amount of different courses made available to students in a given subject, the degree of skill-homogeneity

within classrooms, the proportion of students assigned to high-track courses, the extent to which students migrate across different tracks as they progress through school, the correlation between students' high-track status in one subject with their high-track status in another subject (Domina et al., 2016). While these varying tracking strategies can shift over time, they do little to improve average levels of achievement in English, as gains for high ability students stemming from high ability peers, high teacher expectations, and rigorous coursework were offset by the reverse of these trends on lower ability students (Domina et al., 2016). In mathematics, ability-homogeneous classrooms have negative effects on achievement for all students, with the mechanism theorized to be placing students into classes for which they are not prepared (Domina et al., 2016). Previously, Domina et al. (2015) found that increasing middle school enrollment in Algebra I had a negative average effect on 10th-grade mathematics achievement, especially in large districts. Thus, some forms of ability-grouping are beneficial, with tracking having a small positive impact on achievement for gifted students (Domina et al., 2016; Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2016). These results suggest that optimal policy may be to attempt to enroll all students in high-level English classes to unlock the improved cognitive environment of rigorous courses for all students; however, optimal policy for math and science may come at a slower pace (Domina et al., 2016). Despite the support for gifted tracking found by Steenbergen-Hu et al. (2016), their meta-analysis on decades of research on ability grouping found a significant positive impact for detracking on overall student achievement.

In one of the only randomized control studies in existence, Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer (2011) presented an experiment in which 61 Kenyan schools assigned students to first-grade classes based on prior achievement and 60 other schools assigned students randomly. Although it is very unclear how generalizable these results are outside of Kenyan elementary schools and



how accurate such an early achievement reading could be, Duflo et al. (2011) found lasting positive effects for tracking for both high-achieving and low-achieving students.

Burris et al. (2006) found positive effects for detracking and accelerated mathematics curricula in middle and high school via a quasi-experimental cohort design that measured both academic achievement and the completion of advanced high school math courses. Similar to the California initiative studied by Domina, this initiative pushed all eighth-grade students into Algebra I, an acceleration that is usually seen as necessary for the completion of Calculus I in high school, which is in turn often viewed as a necessary course to apply for science and engineering university programs. These results were replicated and extended in a later quasi-experimental study that also included heterogeneously grouped ninth-grade classes with high expectations (Burris, Wiley, Welner, & Murphy, 2008). These studies of New York middle schoolers found that detracking results in significant improvement for all sub-groups, including minority students, low socioeconomic status students, and students at nearly all initial achievement levels (Burris et al., 2006; Burris et al., 2008). Furthermore, the performance of initial high achievers did not significantly differ compared to homogeneous grouping, and rates of participation and test scores for these high achievers in AP Calculus improved (Burris et al., 2006). The somewhat conflicting results of Burris et al. (2006) and Burris et al. (2008) and Domina et al. (2016), not to mention the continued concerns about equity, demonstrate a continued need for study and how and why detracking initiatives are successful or not. As with the anecdotal successes shared by Bavis (2016) and Mehan (2015), the program Burris et al. (2006) and Burris et al. (2008) studied included significant support systems, as supplemental workshops provided low-achieving students with about 50% more mathematics instruction than before the initiative (Burris et al., 2006).

Other researchers have examined the impact of tracking through its effect on student self-concept, identifying the result that students correctly intuit the structures driving course placement, the importance of teacher perceptions, and the lower quality of instruction for lower tracked classrooms (Oakes, 2005; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006). Dockx, De Fraine, and Vandecandelaere (2019) compared self-concepts for 3,205 students in different tracks in the Netherlands, finding inconsistent effects of higher tracks on student self-concept when matching to other class characteristics such as average academic performance. Thus, the other variables related to tracking, such as the more demanding coursework, higher teacher quality, and teacher attitudes that students correctly perceive, may outweigh any effect on student self-concept (Dockx et al., 2019; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006). Nonetheless, other researchers have found that high-track students put forth a greater effort on their coursework than low track students (Carbonaro & Gamoran, 2002; Farrington et al., 2012). While this advantage for high-track students may be driven in part by the same characteristics that initially qualified them for the high-track class, this greater effort is also a reflection of the more intellectually stimulating nature of high-track classes (Gamoran, 2009) and the virtuous cycle of students' perceived academic success and improvement encouraging them to put forth continued effort (Farrington et al., 2012).

Teacher attitudes are highly important to detracking and differentiation (Horn, 2006; Watanabe, 2006). Via teacher focus groups conducted throughout a school year, Watanabe (2006) found that personal experience is the main factor for many teachers in their perceptions of detracking, ability, and intelligence, and these perceptions feed into instructional practice (Horn, 2006; Watanabe, 2006). For example, teachers who focus on students' lacking writing skills, tend to perceive student ability as relatively fixed, while teachers who focus on an iterative

process of building skills tend to perceive ability as relatively mutable, with the latter group being more favorable to ability-heterogeneity (Watanabe, 2006). Views of subject matter as a fixed progression make it more difficult for teachers to shift their teaching style to more adaptive modes of instruction, and teachers must believe that low-achieving students are capable of learning effectively via inquiry-based forms of instructions in order for this kind of initiative to be effective (Horn, 2006, 2007).

### **Extending Differentiation Theory into Detracking Practice**

Although ample philosophy and instructional suggestions for differentiation are available in publications such as Tomlinson (2001) and others, the translation of differentiation techniques to enhanced learning outcomes is still emerging and not always straightforward. For one, differentiation is a complex and holistic process, and designing programs to support differentiation may leave out important elements for success. Faber et al. (2017) attempted to isolate the effect of data-based decision-making on student achievement but failed to find a significant positive effect and even found reduced benefits for low-ability students. The researchers suggested that these results may be due to reduced expectations for lower-ability students as the result of the data analysis, an important consideration given the emphasis on rigor in successful detracking initiatives and the importance of students' perception of teachers on learning outcomes (Bavis, 2016; Faber et al., 2017; Maulana, Helms-Lorenz, & van de Grift, 2015; Mehan, 2015). Researchers are also still developing ways to measure differentiation, and it is not yet clear whether specific practices such as data-based decision-making are achieving their goals of increased differentiation without interviewing students and teachers (Faber et al., 2017; Valiande et al., 2011).

It is somewhat easier to find individual case studies of differentiation success in detracked classrooms, and Weller (2017) and MacDonald (2017) combined quantitative data with their own qualitative observations and those of students. Weller (2017) provided an example of success in her teacher-practitioner study of using differentiated instruction and standards-based assessment in her detracked honors geometry classrooms. Despite an apparently successful detracking initiative, all low-performing students were either black males or from lower socioeconomic status families, and Weller (2017) did not believe her classroom provided advanced students with sufficient opportunities to deepen their understanding with application. Weller (2017) gave her students self-assessments of each previous class period's learning, which would be used to guide students' self-sorting into groups that would receive appropriate scaffolding and challenges. Weller (2017) found that a differentiated and standards-based unit provided support for all learners by increasing the degree of choice for students and teachers, self-assessments helped students engage in productive metacognition, and that students became frustrated when they perceived agency and choice being taken away from them.

Students can accurately judge teachers' behaviors and attitudes, and these perceptions of teacher behavior are good predictors for learning outcomes, so part of the success of Weller (2017) could result from her a genuine investment in her students' learning outcomes (Maulana et al., 2015; Tomlinson, 2001). Simply creating different expectations of performance for different perceived ability levels often simply creates a de facto, unofficial tracking policy that results in continued achievement gaps (Diamond & Lewis, 2015).

MacDonald (2017) was also not fully satisfied with her initial success in detracking, but her attempt to design formative, standards-based pre-assessments for use in a high school biology unit rendered little to no useful data because the pre-assessments could not capture

students' progress toward standards to which they had not had any exposure. Simmons et al. (2013) attempted to design and introduce a literary intervention supporting knowledge-building and student-regulated comprehension practices for 921 students in 7th- through 10th-grade at high poverty schools in Texas using a pretest-posttest causal-comparative design. Although the instrument's effect on reading was statistically insignificant, effect sizes indicated that higher-performing readers may have benefited more from the intervention focused on student-regulated techniques (Simmons et al., 2013).

The contrasting experiences of MacDonald (2017) and Simmons et al. (2013) with Weller (2017) showed that it is not always straightforward to implement differentiation techniques in detracked classrooms—what works in one subject, such as English, where students likely would have had some exposure in eighth grade to standards that they will encounter in 10th grade, will not necessarily translate to other subjects. This observation is in line with the quantitative results of Domina et al. (2016) that showed different impacts for detracking in English versus mathematics, and differences in differentiation effectiveness may also help explain why Burris et al. (2006) or Bavis (2016) found, contra Domina et al. (2016), stable to improved achievement for all students as a result of detracking.

### **Performance Assessments and Ability Heterogeneity**

One of the most salient tensions in the confluence of detracking and differentiation is the use of performance assessments in detracked classrooms. On one hand, both the use of differentiation strategies and performance assessments can be motivated with a similar, constructivist cognitive framework for learning based on neuroeducation research (Shepard, 2000; Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018). Watanabe (2006) suggested that an open style of instruction, in which students collaborate on tasks with multiple solutions, works best for heterogeneously

grouped classrooms, and it is easy to see how performance assessments would fit these characteristics. Furthermore, Tung (2017) suggested performance assessment as a “personalized and rigorous” (p. 3) approach to assessment that provides benefits for ELLs, Native Americans, students of color who live in poverty, and refugees. Standardized achievement tests may not even provide reliable measures of learning for ELLs (Abedi, 2015). Alvarez and Corn (2008) discussed a decrease in achievement and worsening achievement gap in English after shifting away from authentic assessment. From this perspective, performance-based assessment seems like an obvious fit for successful implementation as a differentiation technique in a detracked classroom. Constructivist-oriented techniques are particularly important in English, as writing, for example, is not just a process of transferring knowledge and skills, but “one in which students construct their writing performance competence on their own initiative” (Al-Jarrah, Mansor, Rashid, Bashir, & Al-Jarrah, 2018).

On the other hand, Kim (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of 148 performance assessment studies, 44 of which were conducted in the United States and 104 of which were conducted in South Korea, finding that performance assessments were less effective in ability-heterogeneous classrooms. The purpose of this study was to explain why quantitative analyses of the impact of performance assessments had revealed a mixed performance, using hierarchical linear modeling to help identify how 12 different variables impacted the performance assessment implementation (Kim, 2005). Although Kim (2005) demonstrated a positive impact for performance assessments on achievement overall, the fact that ability-heterogeneity had a negative impact on performance assessment effectiveness raises more questions in need of further research, especially in light of Domina et al.’s (2016) finding that, after tracking, “high-achieving students tends to experience rapid test score growth in ELA while low-achieving

students fall behind” (p. 34). Performance assessments have been very successful in medical programs, but these programs are more ability-homogeneous than most public high school classrooms given that medical students have already made it through several rounds of testing, application, and acceptance. Chen and Yang (2019) conducted a meta-analysis of 30 journal articles on project-based learning, which is definitionally very similar to and will often be equivalent to performance assessments, finding a medium to large positive effect on student achievement, with the largest effect size being found in social studies. This result is notable in part because it updated the modest effect sizes of Markham, Larmer, and Ravitz (2003) and Thomas (2017), which may be a result of improvements in project-based pedagogy and training over the years, especially a move to learner-centered approaches (Chen & Yang, 2019; Dole, Bloom, & Doss, 2017). As detracking and the use of performance assessments in ability-heterogeneous classrooms also mature, improved instruction may also resolve some of the ambiguities in the existing literature, as differentiation is another approach that would be supported by an increase in learner-centered pedagogy. Performance assessments are believed to be particularly effective in language learning and language arts classes because reading and writing represent purposeful and personally meaningful experiences (Larmer, 2015).

### **Summary**

Rising criticism over the equity and effectiveness of tracking has led to a new wave of contemporary tracking initiatives that have resulted in improved achievement for previously lower track students with little to no downside for higher track students (Bavis, 2016; Mehan, 2015). A defining feature of these new initiatives is their focus on fundamental changes in educational philosophy, high expectations and rigorous coursework, and intense differentiation within the classroom, which may distinguish them from prior initiatives that have shown a mixed

performance in quantitative analyses (Bavis, 2016; Domina, et al., 2016; Mehan, 2015). Close examination of the literature on differentiation techniques in detracked secondary classrooms reveals that successfully translating theory into practice is not always straightforward, and quantitative studies reveal important tensions such as improved scores for high ability students or reduced effectiveness for performance assessments in ability-homogeneous English classrooms (Domina et al., 2016; Kim, 2005; MacDonald, 2017). Although there are several recent quantitative studies showing strong results for detracking in secondary math classes (Burriss et al., 2006; Burriss et al., 2008; Tyson & Roksa, 2016; Tyson & Roksa, 2017), the picture is somewhat murkier for secondary English, with Domina et al. (2016) finding that detracking reduces achievement gaps, in part by negatively impacting high achieving students. The issues of detracking, differentiation, and performance assessments can be unified through the constructivist theory of learning. The issues, mechanisms, and theoretical frameworks involved are highly complex and require the thick and rich data of qualitative study, and the importance of meaning, for constructivist learning theory and teacher instructional practices, makes the transcendental phenomenological design appropriate. My goal in this dissertation is to explore the meaning of teaching in detracked high school English classrooms with performance assessments. This meaning is of crucial importance due to its implications for prioritizing potential policy and instructional tradeoffs, understanding learning outcomes, the importance of schoolwide support systems and culture shifts, and the ability of students to perceive their teachers' attitudes.



## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

### Overview

Students placed into low-ability groups seldom advance to higher tracks, and low-income, single-party, and minority students are overrepresented in lower tracks (Mehan, 2015). Consequently, criticism of tracking has highlighted equity concerns, and shifts to detracking have increased the need to understand its effects and best practices. However, recent quantitative studies by Domina et al. (2016) and Steenbergen-Hu et al. (2016) have highlighted tradeoffs that may cause detracking to decrease achievement for some groups, especially gifted students. Common features of recent unambiguously successful initiatives studied by detracking proponents include high expectations, an emphasis on intensive differentiation and support systems, and culture shifts (Bavis, 2016; Burris et al., 2006; Mehan, 2015). Differentiation techniques are given paramount importance by many researchers, but they are recognized to be demanding and require extensive support and a philosophical redefinition for teachers (Tomlinson, 2001; Weller, 2017). In this transcendental phenomenological study, I focused on the meaning and experience for teachers of detracked secondary English classes using performance assessments. In doing so, I shed light on how participants view their purpose as teachers, the implications of potential tradeoffs for detracking, their attitudes toward differentiation, and their perceptions of the state of the professional development and support that many researchers have suggested as key to detracking and differentiation success. This chapter outlines the design for my dissertation, beginning with an explanation of the transcendental phenomenological research design and continuing to detail the research questions, setting, participants, procedures, and analysis that I carried out. I also include consideration of trustworthiness and ethical issues.

## Design

The study was conducted using a transcendental phenomenological research design with a social constructivist interpretive framework. Qualitative research, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), “begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning of individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 8). Thus, any qualitative research design is fundamentally inductive and informed by the ongoing inquiry. Data collection occurs, to the greatest possible extent, in the setting in which the phenomenon occurs, and analysis by the researcher is both inductive and deductive. The emphasis on the meaning of the experience for each participant carries through to the final report, which includes the voices of the participants, the meaning of the inquiry process for the researcher, analysis that communicates the complexity of the problem, and the contribution of the research to the literature or the practical implications of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This design was informed by the context of the study in the existing literature. I selected a qualitative approach to this research topic because recent quantitative and anecdotal studies have raised important tensions, tradeoffs, and issues in detracking, differentiation, and performance assessments. These tensions, including conflicting results between some empirical studies (Bavis, 2016; Burriss et al., 2008; Domina et al., 2016; Mehan, 2015; Tyson & Roksa, 2017), point to the need for the thick data of qualitative research. Many of the factors that have been suggested as features of successful detracking initiatives, such as high-quality professional development, cultural shifts, and aggressive support systems (Bavis, 2016; Mehan, 2015), can be examined through the firsthand perspective of teachers, but this perspective would not be captured in quantitative datasets.

Phenomenological research attempts to describe the “common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept of phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). Although the existing research contains a number of case studies on individual detracking implementation in secondary schools, the most pressing issues in this topic surround identifying the common features of successful, or unsuccessful, detracking and differentiation initiatives. While it is also useful to examine idiosyncratic cases in detail or to use large datasets to discover overall trends, these approaches have thus far left behind a number of unanswered questions. I chose a phenomenological approach for this research in order to balance the subjective detail of individuals’ lived experiences with the more objective common features of these experiences; as Creswell & Poth (2018) note, “phenomenology lies somewhere on a continuum between qualitative and quantitative research” (p. 76).

Transcendental phenomenology is appropriate for this study on the use of performance assessments in detracked secondary English classrooms because of the approach’s focus on the meaning and structure of experiences. The process of transcendental phenomenology concludes with a synthesis of the textual characteristics, or what the participants experienced, and the structural characteristics, or how and why the participants had their experiences, of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). It is important not just to give voice to the participants’ experiences with detracking, differentiation, and performance assessments, but also to identify and explain what conditions resulted in the participants’ experiences. I chose transcendental phenomenology as my research approach in an attempt to resolve some of the tensions in the existing literature with thick, rich firsthand data and analysis focused on structure. Additionally, given the tensions noted above and the competing narratives already proposed, transcendental phenomenology was also an attractive research approach given the epoche phase’s bracketing

and setting aside of preconceptions, allowing me to identify the essential, defining meaning of the phenomenon with fresh eyes.

All three of the main constructs in this research, performance assessments, detracking, and differentiation, raise crucial questions on the meaning of and purpose for education. For example, some educators may perceive their primary mission as fostering equity, which some educators may understand as all students attaining a given benchmark and which others may understand as fomenting more equitable social and life outcomes for the students as adult. Other educators may prioritize challenging the most gifted students. Teacher perspectives are important because of their potential implications for classroom instructional practices regarding some of the tradeoffs highlighted by Domina et al. (2016). Furthermore, and harmoniously with the philosophical underpinnings of transcendental phenomenology, students can correctly intuit their teachers' attitudes (Yonezawa & Jones, 2006), which are highly important to the success of detracking and differentiation initiatives (Watanabe, 2006), so it is important to understand how teachers define themselves and how they perceive this as affecting their practice. Finally, teachers may offer valuable insight on the educational culture and the state of professional development and support, which are also important features of successful detracking initiatives (Mehan, 2015). Moreover, the focus of the social constructivism interpretive framework on the contextual construction of meaning mirrors the way that the constructivist learning theory describes how learners "actively mediate [new knowledge] by trying to make sense of it and relate it to what they already know" (Good & Brophy, 2003, p. 398).

After bracketing and identifying my preconceptions (Moustakas, 1994), I carried out data collection through interviews, focus groups, and the distribution and collection of open-ended writing prompts to the participants. These forms of data collection allowed me to directly

capture the participants' perspectives of the phenomenon in their own words. This data granted access to the participants' inevitably varying perspectives on the phenomenon, just as one would gain different views of a house or tree by viewing from different angles (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Research Questions**

I utilized the transcendental phenomenological approach and a series of interviews, focus groups, and open-ended writing prompts in order to pursue a deeper understanding of the meaning of teaching in detracked secondary English classrooms using performance assessments by focusing on the following research questions, beginning with the central research question:

**CRQ:** How do teachers describe the purpose and experience of teaching in detracked secondary English classrooms?

The SQs were as follows:

**SQ1:** How do teachers describe the instructional methods in detracked secondary English classrooms that use performance assessments?

**SQ2:** What are the advantages and disadvantages of using performance assessments?

**SQ3:** How do teachers describe the professional development, support systems outside of the classrooms, and overall school culture regarding the implementation of detracking, differentiation, and performance assessments in secondary English classrooms?

### **Setting**

The study included three high schools in Virginia, which were pseudonymously labeled as Oak HS, Elm HS, and Aspen HS to maintain site confidentiality. The primary criteria for site choice was the willing participation of its administration and whether any of its English classes met the selection criteria of featuring detracked student grouping and using performance assessments. Site choice secondarily depended on transportation and research feasibility.

Snowball sampling may be used to identify further candidate sites if necessary (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Oak HS is a suburban school and has approximately 2,000 students, of which 60% are White, 10-15% are Black, 10-15% are Hispanic, and 5-10% are multiple races and 5-10% are Asian or other. The population includes 30% economically disadvantaged students and 10% ELLs. The class of 2018 includes 65% of students earning Advanced diplomas and 30% earning standard diploma; compared to the Virginia averages, this is higher. The school's assessment data shows higher levels of overall Reading and Writing proficiency compared to state and division averages.

Elm HS is a suburban school with approximately 1,200 students, of which 65% are White, 15% are Black, 10-15% are Hispanic, and 5-10% are multiple races and an insignificant amount are Asian or other. The population includes 30% economically disadvantaged students and 7% ELL students. The class of 2018 includes 58% of students earning Advanced diplomas and 30% earning standard diploma; compared to the Virginia averages, this is a higher level for advanced diploma attainment but an overall lower graduation rate. The school's assessment data shows higher levels of Reading proficiency compared to state and division averages, but lower than average levels of Writing proficiency.

Aspen HS is an urban school with approximately 1,200 students, of which 88% are White; other subgroups are all 2% or less. The population includes 10% economically disadvantaged students and less than 1% ELL students. The class of 2018 includes 74% of students earning Advanced diplomas and 24% earning standard diplomas; compared to the Virginia averages, this is a much higher level for both Advanced diploma attainment and the

overall graduation rate. The school has higher levels of Reading and Writing proficiency compared to state and division averages.

### **Participants**

I created the pool of participants via purposeful sampling from a population of teachers at the three participating high schools who consented to participate in the study. I contacted the administration of each building to initially procure the names and email addresses of potential participants with which to proceed. The selection criteria consisted of whether a teacher who is teaching or has taught in the past 2 years detracked high school English classes at the participating high school using performance assessments. I recruited 14 participants in total for the study.

### **Procedures**

Candidate schools satisfying the criteria of having detracked English classes using performance assessments were identified. The superintendent of the district provided written permission to conduct research in the identified district. I received IRB approval (Appendix A) before beginning this study. Immediately after acquiring IRB approval, I conducted a pilot study. This allowed me to test my interview questions to ensure that they would answer my overarching research questions, provided practice of the open-ended interview process, and established a frame of reference for conducting data collection. I conducted one-on-one interviews with three pilot study teachers, focusing my notes on the effectiveness of the practice. These teachers also participated in a focus group. I did not audio record or retain the data, and none of the data collected was included in my data analysis for the final study. None of the pilot study participants are in the actual study.

Following the pilot study, principals and department heads at each candidate school were asked to identify key informants and email the recruitment letters (see Appendix B), which contained links to the screening survey (see Appendix C). Once the pool of candidates was created, candidates were sent acceptance letters (Appendix D) that were accompanied by consent forms along with instructions for signing and returning (Appendix E).

I scheduled interviews and three focus groups with the participants and distributed the writing prompts as described in the data collection section below. After the transcripts and focus group transcripts were completed, participants were invited to engage in the member checking process to check their own transcripts for accuracy. Following the completion of member checking and my own analysis of all data collection tools, I completed a draft of the study findings. Then, I selected 2-3 peers to review my data and analysis to determine if they reached the same conclusions as I did. Throughout the study, I maintained a reflexive journal (Appendix I) recording the research process, any of my biases that arose, and my experience as a transcendental phenomenological researcher.

### **The Researcher's Role**

My role in this dissertation was etic, or attempting to play the role of an outside, objective observer rather than an active participant in the phenomenon or agent of change (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This type of role seems most suited for the nature of transcendental phenomenology, as data collection in this type of research has the goal of accurately collecting the participants' perspectives, not introducing my own (Moustakas, 1994). However, it is imperative that I acknowledged the assumptions and biases that I bring to the research, and my ability to effectively form relationships with the participants was crucial to my ability to make the participants feel comfortable sharing their perspectives with me (Creswell & Poth, 2018).



Although there are several facets to my role in this dissertation, the most important was establishing the social relationships and deserved trust that allowed the collection of thick, rich data and the protection of the participants' confidentiality.

I am currently employed as a teacher in a different district than where I conducted my research and I did not know any of the selected participants. I currently teach fully detracked freshmen and sophomore English classes, and this experience helped me develop rapport with the participants. My axiological assumptions, or values, rely on my conception of the essence of Christianity as placing an infinitely large intrinsic value on each individual (Knight, 2006). The implication of this is that educational practices should be designed to meet and support all learners at their level of need to not leave any students, gifted or disadvantaged alike, below their potential.

### **Data Collection**

I collected data from participants through three methods: interviews, focus groups, and open-ended writing prompts. In-depth interviews designed to retrieve rich, thick information (Patton, 2015) provided the primary data collection method for my qualitative research. Next, the three focus groups were somewhat less formal than the one-on-one interviews and were designed to encourage interactions within the group rather than with me. These followed the interviews so that participants could feel that their voices have already been heard. Finally, open-ended writing prompts allowed teachers the time and personal space that might be necessary for them to further reflect, synthesize, and articulate their voices.

### **Interviews**

I interviewed each participant using a standardized list of open-ended questions. In-depth interviews are the main form of data collection for phenomenological research (Creswell & Poth,

2018; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). Each interview was expected to last approximately 45 minutes and was recorded, with follow-up questions, elaborations, or clarifications occurring via phone or email (see Appendix F).

#### Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me. Please share your history as a teacher.  
How did you decide to become a teacher? How long have you been teaching?
2. What courses do you currently teach, and how would you describe the range of student readiness and ability in these courses?
3. Please describe your experience teaching English at this school.
4. Please talk about how you designed today's lesson.
5. What is your overall philosophy and approach to curriculum and instruction design?
6. Under what conditions do you believe the strongest learning outcomes are achieved?
7. What do you view as your purpose as a teacher?
8. Please describe how the nature of your classroom, namely being detracked and using performance assessments, affects your instruction, curriculum, and expectations?
9. What do you perceive as the purpose of detracking? Of differentiation? Of performance assessments?
10. If your experiences with and perceptions of detracking and performance assessments have changed, how so?
11. Please describe any differences in grading for students based on ability or classification, such as honors or non-honors, in your classes.
12. Describe any perceived tradeoffs in detracking, especially the learning of students of below-average, average, or above-average ability versus in tracked classes.

13. Please describe the amount of professional development and support provided by the school specifically for detracking or differentiation.
14. Describe your feeling of preparation for the task of achieving meaningful differentiation.
15. How would you describe the school's systems for the support of detracking?
16. Please describe how and for what purposes you use performance assessments in your classroom.
17. What advantages and disadvantages, if any, do you perceive for detracking and performance assessments in secondary English classrooms?

Questions 1-4 were designed to be approachable and non-controversial, which helped establish the rapport between the participant and myself that was crucial for helping the participants feel comfortable sharing their full experiences with me (Patton, 2015). Question 5 was designed to understand participants' attitudes toward learning theories, such as the Piagetian and Vygotskian constructivist theoretical framework on which this study is based. This question came after the curriculum and instruction design questions for two reasons: first, to begin with more concrete and specific questions and, second, not to prime participants' responses to the earlier questions with their views on learning theories.

Some researchers have suggested that one way to break into interpretation made difficult by the inevitable interconnectedness of data is to first gain practical understanding; thus, questions 4, 5, and 8 zeroed in on eliciting details on the actual practice of the participants regarding the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2015). The questions on the participants' purpose of teaching came relatively early in the list (questions 6-7) to ensure that the participants were not fatigued when it came time to discuss the central research question. As noted in the discussion of the research question, the purpose of teaching has major implications for all aspects

of the research topic. Question 9 helped identify ways in which the participants' personal purpose as an educator may be in conflict or harmony with their perception of the purposes of detracking, differentiation, and performance assessments.

One of the prime motivations for this study was the tension in the literature on the possible tradeoffs of detracking, such as in Domina et al. (2016); consequently, questions 10 and 12 focused on how the teachers perceived detracking and performance assessments as presenting advantages or tradeoffs. Question 11 covered the area of expectations, which Bavis (2016) and Mehan (2015) as crucial to successful detracking initiatives. One potential advantage of these practices that has been theorized is that they will better support meaningful learning outcomes, and question 16 explored this area of whether performance assessments are perceived primarily a formative or summative tool (Kim, 2005; Piaget, 1970; Watanabe, 2006). Almost all the questions regarding participants' experiences with the phenomenon were presupposition questions that strategically suggested to the participant that a judgment can indeed be made (Patton, 2015). Questions 13 through 15 emphasized the school-level support systems and attitudes that Mehan (2015), Tomlinson (2001), and others emphasized as essential to detracking or differentiation initiatives.

### **Focus Groups**

Participants at each school were asked to participate in a focus group session. The socialized process of the focus group enriched the data by enabling the group to construct meaning in a social context, and the focus group helped illuminate important group dynamics that shed light on the research questions (Patton, 2015). The focus group questions were as follows (see Appendix G):

#### **Standardized Open-Ended Focus Group Questions**

1. Please describe to me how long the teachers in this group and department have been working together.
2. Please describe to me how you collaborate with one another.
3. Please discuss the history of detracking as you have experienced it at your school.
4. Please discuss the history of performance assessment usage at your school.
5. What motivated the adoption of detracking and performance assessments at your school?
6. What challenges or benefits have detracking, performance assessments, and their combination brought to teaching English?
7. In what ways have detracking or performance assessments impacted collaboration among teachers?
8. What would you describe as the purpose of detracking and differentiation?
9. To what extent do these goals align with your goals as a department?
10. To what extent do you believe these goals are achieved?
11. In what ways has the school administration supported detracking and differentiation?

The first two questions were designed to stimulate general discussion of collaboration to emphasize the social, interactive nature of the focus group. These questions were meant to be relatively straightforward and non-controversial, which hopefully developed rapport between the subjects and with me, as well as with each other (Patton, 2015). The next three questions were about the background of detracking and performance assessment usage at the school. Mehan (2015) described a number of political obstacles that may impede detracking, and motivations for detracking and performance assessments have emphasized equity, efficacy, or both (Bavis, 2016; Black, 2015). These questions helped capture data about the context of the experience for the participants. Questions 6-7 began to dig into some of the tensions in the literature on detracking

and performance assessments in the literature, particularly the challenges of implementing new initiatives and the possibly divergent impact of detracking and performance assessments alike based on the level of classroom ability-heterogeneity (Domina et al., 2015; Kim, 2005; MacDonald, 2017; Mehan, 2015). Questions 8-9 attempted to take advantage of the social construction of meaning in the focus group; after the participants have discussed various aspects of the research topic, they jointly constructed a meaning that differed in interesting ways from the meaning of the experience that the participants were able to articulate individually.

### **Writing Prompts**

Participants were presented with open-ended writing prompts to provide them with another opportunity and mode of making their voice heard (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Writing prompts stimulated additional reflection, allowed participants to note information not recalled or shared during the social setting of the interview, and provided another form of expression. Participants were directed to complete the writing prompts by reflecting on anecdotal occurrences related to the overarching questions (see Appendix H).

### **Writing Prompt Questions**

1. The psychological theory of constructivism suggests that the highest quality, longest-lasting learning results from the activity and self-organization resulting from learners' attempts to create context and meaning for new information. To what extent have you found performance assessments or detracking to support this kind of learning? To what extent do you find these contentions about learning to be true and why?
2. What administrative support have you received for implementing detracking? Which aspects of this support have been most/least helpful? What additional support would you like to receive?

Although these questions were already covered in the interview question list without explicitly noting constructivism, the first question directly asked the teachers to consider whether the implications of the theory of constructivism from Piaget (1970) and Vygotsky (1986) are correct, as well as whether this could be extended to detracking and performance assessments as Black (2015), Tomlinson (2015), and many others have suggested. This shed light on the extent to which participants' understandings mesh with the theoretical framework for the study and gave participants a chance to organize and articulate their views on the nature of learning in written form.

The second asked teachers to discuss the extent of administrative support for detracking, which many detracking proponents have identified as crucial to successful initiatives (Mehan, 2015). In addition, this question also presented a potential opportunity for reciprocity, as my research may present me with the ability to provide participants with the additional support they desire.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was carried out via Moustakas' procedures (1994). First, all data was transcribed and stored in a secure cloud storage system. Next, I undertook the epoché phase of phenomenology, in which I adopted an attitudinal shift that allowed me to suspend judging the participants' descriptions of the phenomenon through my biases and preconceptions; at the very least, I described and clarified the biases that could potentially impact my interpretation (Moustakas, 1994). I stored these thoughts in my reflexive journal. After reading and annotating the transcript several times, I developed a list of significant statements about how the participants experienced and perceived the phenomenon of teaching in detracked classrooms that use performance assessments (Moustakas, 1994). Formulated statements were derived from these

significant statements, a selection of which can be found in Appendix K. This allowed me to identify, in the participants' own words, data directly linked to the phenomenon. Next, I conducted horizontalization, a process which Moustakas (1994) described as ensuring that "each phenomenon has equal value as we seek to disclose its nature and essence" (p. 95). Practically, one consequence of this is that all significant statements were initially granted equal weight (Moustakas, 1994). Later, the invariant qualities and themes of the phenomenon were identified via the clustering of non-repetitive, non-overlapping items into themes that were more tractable for interpretation (Moustakas, 1994). I did this by creating Table 1 found in Chapter 4 in which I listed the non-repetitive, non-overlapping items (horizons) in the left column and then the themes that emerged by clustering the horizons together.

An initial focus of analysis was on understanding the actual practices of the participants and their schools (Patton, 2015). I unified and synthesized the themes into a textural description of "what" the participants experienced, including direct quotes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). The construction of meaning through imaginative variation is a reflective stage with four major steps: (a) systematically varying possible structural meanings and interpretations; (b) recognizing the underlying context of the phenomenon; (c) considering how universal human experiences may manifest in the phenomenon; and (d) searching for examples that illustrate the proposed essence (Moustakas, 1994). In this way, I also produced a structural description of "how" the experience happened, or why it contained the meaning it did for the participants, and this included information such as the personal, social, and cultural context in which the teachers taught (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). These two descriptions were combined into a composite that advanced my interpretation of the essence of the



phenomenon of using performance assessments to teach detracked secondary English classrooms (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015).

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was supported in four main areas. Lincoln and Guba (1986) proposed four main areas of trustworthiness for qualitative studies: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Traditional conceptions of trustworthiness can be difficult to apply to qualitative work given that the research is underpinned by assertions such as that “there is no single reality on which inquiry may converge” (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 75). Credibility addresses whether my “reconstruction and representation” of the participants’ experiences cohere with the participants’ view of the same (Patton, 2015). Dependability and confirmability both focus on my role as the researcher, on whether the inquiry process was sufficiently reasoned and documented and whether my analysis and interpretations were reasonable, respectively (Patton, 2015). Transferability deals with the ability to generalize from the study’s examination of cases (Patton, 2015).

### **Credibility**

The credibility aspect of trustworthiness is an analogue to internal validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). I allowed for member-checking, in which my participants reviewed transcripts of their individual interviews and their part of the focus group discussion. I used a peer reviewer to look at my raw data and determine whether or not my view of the essence of the participants’ experience was the same as hers. This occurred before I derived my final findings. As recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1986), I used an outside expert to complete a non-biased review of my final findings. This expert holds an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership and is familiar with qualitative research design through the completion of her own dissertation. She

examined the data collection process, the coding methodology, and the analysis of the results and found that assertions are reliably supported by the data presented. Triangulation is the cross-checking of data and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Triangulation was carried out through the use of different data collection methods (e.g., interviews, focus groups, and open-ended essay questions) and also supported by the use of multiple participants at different sites (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

To address dependability, I noted my reasons for making research decisions in a reflexive journal and maintain secure digital copies of all data and analysis documents; this provided a traceable trail and maintained the needed materials for a potential audit (Patton, 2015). Patton (2015) noted that audits are useful for both dependability and confirmability, and confirmability was also addressed by a “[c]longitudinal alertness to [my] own biases and subjectivity” that I demonstrated through a reflexive journal that tracks what I bring to the research and how the research has affected me (p. 670). My reflexive journal is found in Appendix I. The very nature of transcendental phenomenology indeed demands cognizance of my own subjectivity (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Transferability**

This aspect of trustworthiness was supported by context about the participating schools, social or political dynamics in the school communities, and the context in which the research occurs for the participants (Patton, 2015). Lincoln and Guba (1986) recommend the provision of “thick descriptive data” to satisfy transferability, as this data provides a “narrative developed about the context so that judgments about the degree of fit or similarity can be made by others” (p. 77). Readers of the study were made aware of important features of the research process or

site that may cause the study's results to be idiosyncratic and difficult to generalize. The audit trail also provides information about the study's steps and procedures (See Appendix J).

### **Ethical Considerations**

No data collection took place until I received approval from the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participation and continued participation were clearly voluntary for all participants. Informed consent was obtained from the administration of each school and from each participant. No participant withdrew from the study. Each participant and school's confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the presentation of any anecdotes in a composite format (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Pseudonyms for schools do not reveal any characteristics. Interviews were conducted at locations of each participant's choosing, but the conversations were not able to be heard by others. All recorded interviews, transcripts, and other written data and analysis was stored on a password-protected folder on a personal laptop and on a secure cloud storage backup. Three years after the completion of the study, all recordings and written data would be manually deleted on both the device and via cloud storage.

### **Summary**

The meaning and experiences shared by teachers in this transcendental phenomenology was highly important because of their implications for classroom practices and administrative policy, their insights into teacher attitudes, and their descriptions of support and culture of secondary schools with detracked English classrooms using performance assessments. There is a need for this research due to the growing interest in detracking and the clear success of recent initiatives described by Bavis (2016), Burriss et al. (2008), and Mehan (2015). These researchers, among others, have emphasized the importance of differentiation practices and schoolwide

culture shifts, and this dissertation directly examined teachers' attitudes and perceptions of the systems put in place to support differentiation. This research is also valuable due to the tension of the successful recent initiatives with the more ambiguous picture of the effect that detracking has on achievement found by Domina et al. (2016) and may suggest further avenues for research. This transcendental phenomenological study used a social constructivist framework and gathered data through interviews, focus groups, and open-ended writing prompts. Fourteen teachers from three high schools in Virginia, as well as other key informants comprised the participant pool. Teachers shared their experiences, practices, and perspectives on the meaning of teaching detracked English classrooms that use performance assessments.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Overview

The purpose of this study was to understand how teachers describe the experience of using performance assessments in detracked English classrooms. This chapter offers context about the study's participants, including teaching experience, their current teaching practices, and their self-described philosophies of curriculum and instruction. Themes that emerged from the participants' perspectives and observations are provided in order to illustrate and identify common aspects of the phenomenon. This chapter gives voice to the participants through direct quotations obtained during personal interviews, focus groups, and journal prompt reflections. The participants' voices and significant statements are used to develop the themes that drove this study. The final section of this chapter concludes by summarizing the collected data and answering the central research question and sub-questions.

### Participants

The main criteria for being a participant in this study was whether an educator had, within the past 2 years, taught detracked English classes that utilized performance assessments as a measure of student learning. Across the three participating high schools, I was able to identify 15 participants who met these requirements and were willing to participate in the study.

### Adam

Adam has been teaching for 8 years; he is a "career-switcher" who served previously as a government contractor. He currently teaches ninth-grade Academic English, several sections of a detracked ninth-grade Honors English course, as well as an 11th-grade Academic English class. When speaking about the readiness levels of his students, he felt the impact of their lack of success in middle school: "I would say overwhelmingly, there's a majority of the kids that

probably haven't reached that level of readiness in both my academic and in the detracked Honors classes for both grades. We're getting there" (personal communication, March 2, 2020).

Despite these entry levels, Adam remained optimistic about their potential for success. He observed that students are "eager to step up to the plate in most cases, and hopefully by the end of the year we'll get closer to where they should be" (personal communication, March 2, 2020). One aspect of curriculum design that Adam viewed as crucial to student success in this detracked environment is teacher modelling. Regarding his lesson from the day of our interview, he stated:

I want the kids to have a good example of the type of research and annotation that I'm expecting them to do. So we're going to research, we're going to, I'm going to present them with an article, it's a biographical type article on an individual, and model how I would go about annotating that and then summarizing that so that they know what to do when they pull up articles about the person they're researching. (personal communication, March 2, 2020)

Adam's ability to facilitate this type of instruction stems from his approach to instruction in general. Adam was very forward-thinking—not only in his goals for student achievement, but also in his description of the path he has developed for them to get there. He noted he has to:

decide what I want my end state to be before going into it. And what I mean by that is, I want to understand what my outcome should look like and then backwards plan from there to figure out how to get there...well if I start by deciding what I want the end to look like and create a path for how to get there, it all kind of works together, so the assessments and the instruction go towards getting to that end state and it may not necessarily be linear. (personal communication, March 2, 2020)

When it comes to those assessments, Adam felt that their purpose is as a gauge:

Ideally, they should tell me whether I need to go back and re-cover something or if their ready to move on. I use performance assessments to measure the level of learning of my students, of what they've learned and where we need to go with it and to see if I need to reteach or re-cover. (personal communication, March 2, 2020)

He repeatedly stressed that unlike traditional assessment, his assessments do not signify the end of learning, but merely a comprehensive checkpoint for students. Furthermore, he acknowledged that curriculum is only a part of how strong learning outcomes are achieved. True success, for Adam, begins with security. He stressed the importance of students "feeling secure in who they are and knowing that they can take risks because they're loved in that classroom, that type of security. The security that you get when someone cares about you" (personal communication, March 2, 2020).

Adam's perception of differentiation and its purpose is complex, and he often spoke intermittently with passion and concern in his voice. Overall, he observed that "kids, from what I can tell, rise to the challenge" (personal communication, March 2, 2020), but he considered potential detriment in the detracking approach:

I think the potential disadvantage is that it will bring down the expectations for all the kids in the class and may be an unintended consequence at least initially....You really should be looking at the gaps beginning in kindergarten, first, and second, and third grade, so by the time they get to nine and ten, by the time they get to high school, the gaps are not as problematic. (personal communication, March 2, 2020)

Furthermore, he acknowledged that there are some things that cannot be differentiated in the classroom, such as "socioeconomic factors in the student's life" (personal communication,

March 2, 2020). He shared that while there are discussions surrounding how to close those gaps, “I don’t think we fully developed how to best implement those ideas” (personal communication, March 2, 2020).

While voicing these concerns, he stressed that ultimately his detracked classroom allows him to have high expectations for all students. When it comes to grading differences in his detracked Honors class versus his Academic section, he stated:

I may, pretty much grade all the same, because it’s the workload is kind of where I differentiate, or the rigor is where I differentiate in what they, what I give them, not how I assess it because the standard’s the standard so you got to assess the standard equally.

(personal communication, March 2, 2020)

However, hesitation slowly crept into Adam’s voice when considering outside support. This uncertainty was present when reflecting on professional development provided by the school for either detracking or differentiation. He explained:

Well, support has been minimal. Minimal support for both. I know we had very little differentiation professional development. And, the same with detracking, it was “Hey, we’re doing this to try to kind of bridge the gap” and that’s about all we have for support. I don’t even know what that support would necessarily look like. I think that they think there’s support. But because I don’t know, no, I think there’s very little support. There could be some that I don’t know about, which I guess is equal to no support. (personal communication, March 2, 2020)

Still, upon reflection, Adams added, “I guess I’m pretty well-prepared because my kids seem to be doing well” (personal communication, March 2, 2020).



**Alice**

Alice wanted to be a teacher from the time she was told that ‘Princess’ was not an acceptable career aspiration. She has been with her school system since 2011—as a substitute teacher for 2 years, for 3 years doing alternative education and remediation, and then 3 years in her current position. She currently teaches a Vocab & Comprehension elective for struggling readers and English as a Second Language (ESL) students, as well as several sections of detracked English Honors classes. She described the readiness and ability in those detracked classes as “SPED students who we are working to get on a third-grade comprehension level, up to students who are already reading at college level” (personal communication, March 2, 2020). To keep this range of students engaged, she felt strongly that “we need various activities throughout the class period” (personal communication, March 2, 2020).

Alice felt that the strongest learning outcomes are achieved “when students have some stake in what they’re learning and know why they think it’s important” (personal communication, March 2, 2020). In regard to performance assessments, Alice stressed:

The most useful are ones that are more based in what we’re doing at the time....The performance assessments, I mean if our end goal is to pass an SOL test and that is as far as we’re going, they are helpful in measuring who needs to see, you know, who needs some extra help. (personal communication, March 2, 2020)

This student buy-in is established within Alice’s classroom as a result of detracking. She explained:

I think for the majority of our students the detracking is beneficial and helps them learn more from each other, be more empathetic towards one another, learn from each other.

And, expectations, I think it is also there for the students to see, to push them to work to what they can do. (personal communication, March 2, 2020)

Alice continually brought the conversation back to life outside of school and the reality in which people live. She stressed that “As far as detracking and differentiation, the world is more detracked and differentiated so you need to know how to get along with and see other people” (personal communication, March 2, 2020). Her approach to grading mirrored this real-world philosophy that makes allowances for student learning differences, an approach that carries throughout all of her classes. There is no difference in expectations for students based on ability because “the majority of it is based on, you know, either rubric grading or just on mastery and I am generally happy to regrade if a student wants to resubmit work with me or go ‘I didn’t get it’” (personal communication, March 2, 2020). In fact, this philosophy counteracts some of the apathetic approaches to learning that Alice saw in previous tracked classes, which carries over to the detracked program. She became exasperated when describing student attitudes toward learning: “It’s ‘How fast can I get this work done and go on and do what I’d rather do?’ I think it is helpful to teach to, and just go, ‘Here is where I want you to be. Let’s aim for this’” (personal communication, March 2, 2020).

Alice was perhaps most dejected when discussing professional development and supported provided to help her achieve these tasks. “There was a two hour session at the beginning of the school year,” she conceded, “The majority of the preparation I feel that I have for it has been what I’ve done on my own and I don’t feel that it is quite enough so I am kind of learning as I go” (personal communication, March 2, 2020).

**Bob**

Teaching is a second career for Bob, who previously worked as a cabinet maker. He switched to education in order to have more time to spend with his family. Bob currently teaches sophomores and seniors and noted that they run the gamut in terms of academic ability as well as English proficiency. However, his overall experience has been quite positive, and he loved that “we determine our own content. As long as we’re teaching to the standard” (personal communication, March 3, 2020).

Bob designs his lessons with performance assessment in mind. He explained:

So we’re building toward an essay, which has multiple standards attached: style guide, author’s purpose citing textual evidence, supporting inference, research projects. I start with the standard I determine assessments from there that I would like to see within the unit. And then, from those assessments I then begin to design our demonstrations of learning, which are the daily assignments that the students have. And those are all designed to scaffold up towards that final assessment for the unit. (personal communication, March 3, 2020)

Bob’s explanations turned passionate when explaining his philosophy and how it extends beyond the standards, stressing that “So anything that I present to the kids needs to have some type of cultural or societal relevance” (personal communication, March 3, 2020). Bob seemed certain that this is the key to achieving meaningful learning outcomes. He explained:

It’s my belief that engagement is, not that there is a magic bullet, but if there was, engagement is it. If we can just get a kid engaged, if we can get them hooked, if we can get them interested, if we can get them curious. (personal communication, March 3, 2020)

Bob also recognized that his purpose is to ensure this happens for all students, “whatever that looks like for kids in their individual situations. You know, the ability to have a goal, to devise a plan, to execute that plan, and realize success” (personal communication, March 3, 2020).

Student expression for Bob’s students often come in the form of performance assessments. He justified his decision:

A lot of my assessments are essays....And, I learned that teaching a kid to be able to organize their thoughts and express those thoughts with a specific purpose in mind really works to organize their mind. It really works to, it helps them with that efficacy piece, as well...they’ve done all the work, they’ve done all the reading, they’ve done all the inferencing, but they get to that end essay and they’re like “Oh my god. Two thousand words, how am I going to do this?” And then we go through it piece by piece....And then when it comes time for the first essay they realize “Oh, these are constructed responses. Are just body paragraphs out of context.” (personal communication, March 3, 2020)

In fact, Bob shared that he feels that performance assessments are the best way to allow students of varying ability levels to shine academically:

A kid can inference and support his inferences with textual evidence without being, you know, a good speller. A kid can identify author’s tone and author’s purpose without fully understanding punctuation and capitalization. So, you know, through that understanding, you know I’m able to, I’m able to differentiate in that way. (personal communication, March 3, 2020)

This ability is still rooted in Bob’s initial design-focus, for he stressed that “but by focusing on the state standards, those state standards that are appropriate for that grade level, I’m delivering the same education to all kids, regardless of their ability” (personal communication,

March 3, 2020). Bob noted that this is easier to do at the high school level because “all my standards are the higher level stuff” (personal communication, March 3, 2020). He has also had support to aid him along the way:

I know that there have been district initiatives that have helped us along...with high expectations come high performance. And when I make it known that I’m not going to accept any half-assed work, and I don’t mind terming it as such, they, you know, they step up to the plate and deliver. (personal communication, March 3, 2020)

Bob has been able to maintain these high expectations through modification of assignments instead of modification of grading:

With the mainstream classification I might have to many required pieces of textual evidence, simply to support their inferences. And then for the honors classification, I will include a call to action within that essay, and they still have to provide the same amount of textual support, but the focus of that support now changes from that original prompt to the essay to, you know, now projecting forward and making predictions as to how, you know, we can make this better. (personal communication, March 3, 2020)

Bob appeared to allow for other differences, acknowledging that “a lot of times within the rubric I’ll, you know, for the mainstream kids, I’ll go a little easier on them on the rubric, you know” (personal communication, March 3, 2020). However, Bob seemed adamant that the situation should never be about amount of work given. He observed, “You know, I would never give honors kids a 3,000 word essay and then mainstream gets a 2,000 word essay. I mean, if you ever wanted to derail a kid’s education based on this classification that, that’s the way to do it” (personal communication, March 3, 2020).

Bob had considered the effects of detracking on his students, but he overall had a positive perception of the process. He was willing to admit that “if you spend any time in the classroom you understand that some kids are a little more fragile than others” (personal communication, March 3, 2020). Still, he seemed to stand by his decision to raise the bar for many students, explaining that “So, I’ve placed kids in honors classes that really shouldn’t have been there. But I saw that they, that they were thriving with a challenge” (personal communication, March 3, 2020). Still, he observed that “I will say it’s more than just ability. We have to look at the whole kid” (personal communication, March 3, 2020). Bob also explained ways to challenge those students at the highest-readiness levels:

For the advanced kids one of the greatest tools I found is having them teach, you know, not in a formal sense, not in a sense that would provide more work for them. But, you know, just within collaborative efforts within the classroom. They’re given a bit more of a leadership role. (personal communication, March 3, 2020)

For Bob, this sort of peer leadership has ripple effects. He noticed that:

for some of the lower-performing kids, when they start to see what’s actually possible, you know, what other teenagers are able to achieve, they start to, they start to have a little more belief in themselves. I will say in our district, being a low income district, you know there’s a lot of problems with efficacy and belief in oneself. (personal communication, March 3, 2020)

Bob also spoke about “culturally responsive education” which he described as “my overarching philosophy of, you know, making things relevant for the kid within the content” (personal communication, March 3, 2020), an approach that he gleaned from graduate school. Although Bob stressed that “I’m very satisfied with what my graduate school had to offer,” he

paused before adding, “I will say there is no adequate preparation available, other than being in the room with the kids and having to get it done” (personal communication, March 3, 2020). In fact, when describing school supports for differentiation and detracking, Bob admitted that “for the mainstream kids, for the bulk of our students, we really just rely on, you know, caring, competent teachers toeing the line” (personal communication, March 3, 2020).

### **Brenda**

Brenda has been with the school district for 20 years, serving as a substitute teacher for 13 of those years. She went to school for Health & Wellness, but then switched careers after realizing there was not enough demand for her major in the area. She is continuing to explore her love of dance through the theater and dance classes that she teaches in addition to her two core English classes. When asked about the readiness of her ninth-grade students, Brenda sighed and explained that because of the turnover at the middle school level, she feels that “new teachers aren’t pushing them to write” (personal communication, March 3, 2020). As far as her own expectations, Brenda was on board with the school’s curriculum. She explained that:

A couple of years ago we had, they bought a curriculum, called Springboard, which is a College Board, umm, the College Board brand. And so, I’ll use, I use a lot of that, to teach my classes, most because those are already in alignment with, you know, the state standards. (personal communication, March 3, 2020)

Even within a boxed curriculum, Brenda stressed that she tries to “make it fun, especially for the kids that are in the, with the IEP” (personal communication, March 3, 2020). Brenda applied a two-pronged approach to her instructional philosophy—first, “I tried to know something individual about them” she began, and followed up by stating, “curriculum-wise, I try and prepare them for college” (personal communication, March 3, 2020).

Brenda stressed that to achieve these goals “a lot of it is a relationship thing with teachers” (personal communication, March 3, 2020). She argued that “they need to enjoy being here, enjoy being here or they’re not going to want to come” (personal communication, March 3, 2020). To increase this enjoyment, Brenda appeared to turn to performance assessments; in her electives, “your Semester Exams for dance is, is a performance” (personal communication, March 3, 2020). However, for English she got a bit more creative:

I’ve taken that five paragraph persuasive essay and turned it into an ad, they have to, they have to get up and present it, whether they get up and give me a radio type speech that they would do, or storyboard that they’ve done to fly, or a, you know, hey I designed this website, or I designed this, that, that’s a performance thing...they think they’re doing so much less work...that’s basically like a project-based learning. (personal communication, March 3, 2020)

Brenda sensed a strong purpose behind this type of performance assessment. She noticed that “they’re still showing me that they learned what I tried to get them to learn, but they’re just doing it in a way that they feel the most comfortable” (personal communication, March 3, 2020). Even when describing differences between students, there was not much out of the ordinary in Brenda’s world. She added, “so, in my co-taught class, that a lot of those students have an IEP, so they’ll have the individual education plan, and those kids can be, on their IEP, will get more time to do work on an assignment” (personal communication, March 3, 2020). There also appeared to be slight differences in environment:

My class with the CT, it tends to be louder, because so many of those kids have trouble concentrating that they’re distracted and they distract each other, but you also have kids in there that are, just that will also be like, “Hey, try and do this. Be quiet.”... My



elective, there's not a real big difference, because those electives are all pretty much hands on class participation daily. They're all, you know, we're all pretty much doing the same thing all the time, so right. (personal communication, March 3, 2020)

Brenda also worried about how certain students are perceived in a detracked class. She described one student in particular: "He's gifted, I know, I hear about him and other classes, you know, he's got those great ideas but sometimes, you know, the other kids are like, 'Oh, be quiet'" (personal communication, March 3, 2020).

At the same time, Brenda admitted that when it came to professional development, most of what she received was through formal education. She conceded that "I haven't had any in my school but I did in my master's classes" (personal communication, March 3, 2020). Therefore, she relied on open communication to brainstorm issues that arise, admitting that "And when I had classes like that and I would talk to like my special ed guy" (personal communication, March 3, 2020). Otherwise, she relied on varied strategies to help her differentiation for student needs:

graphic organizers, or for guided notes, you know, these are, these are helping those students that may need that little extra help so I've created some graphic organizers that just really helps the kids stay on task, you know, that leads them in the direction we're trying to go, etc. (personal communication, March 3, 2020)

Brenda then added, "I also make sure that we're changing tasks" (personal communication, March 3, 2020). To address the needs of students with high-readiness, Brenda shrugged and added:

if you want more challenging, you go to AP, or there's even a dual credit class here...we don't have enough students to offer like juniors honors plus AP lit, you know, so instead of the honors, it is AP Lit or AP language. (personal communication, March 3, 2020)

### **Carol**

Carol decided to become a teacher in her junior year of college after spending the previous 2 years considering a career in broadcasting. She started teaching when she was 21 and has been an educator for 14 years. Carol's passion comes through when she explained her inspiration and how she "want[s] to be able to change lives in the classroom" (personal communication, March 4, 2020). She expanded upon her thought, explaining that "I feel like if I can be that for them, I can help them, not just be the changes the world needs but also spread kindness and love" (personal communication, March 4, 2020).

Carol has taught all levels and different variations, but this year she teaches the ninth-grade detracked Honors courses. She appeared to be slightly disappointed when explaining the range of student readiness in her courses:

When they come to me they're really not at the level that they should be, for better way of saying it. They really don't have like the strong, critical thinking skills, being able to break apart a text or figure out what words mean, like context clues and, and those different aspects. (personal communication, March 4, 2020)

However, Carol was not satisfied with the status quo. Instead, she was adamant that her role is to help her students make progress. To approach this, "we do a lot of like, building voice, and being able to establish an argument, and using factual evidence that will help establish, try and persuade the reader to understand like what they're trying to say" (personal communication, March 4, 2020). This can be challenging for students, as Carol observed that:

and so now, as, as ninth graders, like they, coming to me, they had never done a timed-write before, either. And so, like, that ability to time themselves, that ability to think critically and then put it together in a short period of time has been a huge, like, gap for them. (personal communication, March 4, 2020)

Because of these initial gaps, Carol seemed pleased with where the students are now. She explained excitedly, “And so it’s really interesting to see now, like they have an opinion, and they can get into a text, and they can pull information out and they can interpret that, we work a lot on interpretation” (personal communication, March 4, 2020). Carol also added that “we do books that are things that they can relate to and are not necessarily the books that traditional English teachers teach” (personal communication, March 4, 2020).

As Carol described her lesson for the day, her expectations for her students are clear. She asked the students the following:

what are some examples of logos, so like they had to go in and they had to find like citations that prove like, well, this is what I think, the persuasion, is that he’s trying to like point out and, just in the beginning, and here’s some examples that prove that. (personal communication, March 4, 2020)

To bring that lesson back around to relatability, Carol explained that afterwards,

we talked a lot about perspective and how he used rhetoric to show and create the rhetorical situation of, well, what does it mean, what is America like, is America white, is America black, like what is America, because it’s talked about. (personal communication, March 4, 2020)

In order to have these discussions, Carol appeared to incorporate particular strategies into her instructional design. She expressed that the students “need tools to be able to do the skills

that go beyond my class” (personal communication, March 4, 2020). To foster these skills, “I do a lot of stop-and-go, I do a lot of modeling...I give them somewhat of a template. And then they have to move out of that template” (personal communication, March 4, 2020). However, she observed that this can be challenging for her students: “I’ll do like a new technique that we build and build and build. And so first semester with me is really hard because they’ve never done these things before” (personal communication, March 4, 2020).

Carol seemed to have full faith in her process; she was passionate in explaining that “them having to validate their thinking is what really resonates their ability to think” (personal communication, March 4, 2020). She also explained that:

they’ll do for homework and the next day they come in and they share their answers with each other and they have to talk about why they got the answers that they did. I tell them if they want to change their answers, they can, because it’s, it’s practice. (personal communication, March 4, 2020)

Carol continued to go back to the students’ perceptions of her and this class format:

At the beginning they are intimidated with, by me, because I’m the teacher, so it gives them like a security, and a comfort to pick who they share with and who they talk to and then discuss what I need them to discuss full group but in smaller groups so that they’re not overwhelmed. (personal communication, March 4, 2020)

Performance assessments appeared to be in tune with Carol’s approach. She observed, “Yeah, so, we don’t take a whole lot of tests in my class” (personal communication, March 4, 2020). In elaborating on different types of assessment, Carole explained:

By seeing the progression and how they do with the multiple-choice passages, ultimately tells me whether they’re building, or like where they’re, they’re getting those skills down

or not. You can call it, the kids vocabulary is improving based on the way that they annotate the text....We do MAP testing throughout the year....And so writing is huge for us, like, and I think that's why kids know like, they can't really cheat in my class, like you can't BS through an essay...the end of their assessment is a timed-write and they have to be able to have an opinion, argue it, utilize textual evidence...I think that in itself is the performance. (personal communication, March 4, 2020)

Carol continued to stress the important of writing, explaining that “their major grades are always with essays and writing and they're in class” (personal communication, March 4, 2020).

However, she was still able to differentiate for her students when teaching through more traditional methods:

With the multiple-choice passages where they share their answers with one another. That's huge for me on the differentiation because I've started to notice my kids that are lower, so to speak, than others, that their peers are helping them understand like, the way that they think it's really important for kids to understand how they think in general. And so when you have kids that can teach each other like, oh, well, but this is what I did when I did it. And this is why I thought this like, they're going through the metacognitive skills without even realizing it. (personal communication, March 4, 2020)

Carol noted she has observed further advantages for her students with lower-readiness. She seemed excited when she described how “and then what I found with my lower level kids, is it allows them to see the dynamics of how somebody else is able to like, catch things that, that are different for me” (personal communication, March 4, 2020). Carol wanted all of her students to feel included, explaining, “everybody has a different opinion so that matters” (personal communication, March 4, 2020).

Carol also utilized specific instructional strategies within the process of differentiation.

She explained:

I differentiate question techniques. So like, I'll ask questions that are level questions like, one through four, and I label them so that the kids can identify what questions they're struggling with, so that that way they know how to build that. (personal communication, March 4, 2020)

Furthermore, even assessment tools could help Carole in her endeavors, because "we do a rubric and the rubric identifies different things" (personal communication, March 4, 2020).

Carol had high expectations for all of her students. She told a story about one in particular, explaining,

I have a young lady this year who's very extravagant, like she's amazing at writing, and she's really good at it. But I think there's always room to improve so with her, like I don't dock her grade, but I'm harder on her about voice. (personal communication, March 4, 2020)

For more struggling learners, Carol stressed that:

I still get them to the level of expectation I have where I want them to be...what ways do I have to change that in order to get them there, because I think anybody can do it. I think some people need more support than others. (personal communication, March 4, 2020)

Carol seemed somewhat disappointed in the lack of professional development she has received at her current school, but she explained that she was fortunate to have opportunities to learn in her previous state:

A literacy coach helped us, and like taught us how to break down questions for kids, taught us how to write code or to create activities where kids could figure out context

clues, or analyze, or what a comprehension question was, what a knowledge question was, what a synthesis question was...I had really great training, and I had really great mentors....And so a lot of my strategies, come from [my previous location]. (personal communication, March 4, 2020)

However, Carol was worried about her current situation, expressing again that:

there's just not as much support as there is needed...at [my old school] there were extra courses kids could take, like we do ACT prep, they can take classes on the weekend for that, but other than that, like other ways to support it, it's the teacher. (personal communication, March 4, 2020)

### **Dottie**

Dottie had a meaningful third-grade experience, where a teacher noticed her need for glasses “and I knew from that moment on, I was gonna be another Mrs. O’Connor” (personal communication, March 4, 2020). However, she entered the education field as a non-traditional student after first marrying and having children. She first worked in elementary education, earned a certificate in specialized behavior disorders, gained a master’s in middle school science, and then eventually spent 13 years in English classes because of her K-12 certification. Her experience was interesting in that she teaches students at detracked ability levels who are grouped together through a common thread of having behavioral issues.

Dottie sounded determined when explaining her experience teaching English at this school. She ardently explained that “you had to meet them where they were, at their level, and everyone was different” (personal communication, March 4, 2020). Whenever Dottie came up against a road-block, she stressed that “if something didn’t work, then I would go punch and figure out a way to get through to those kids that, because they all learn different, their learning

styles were way different, the process totally different” (personal communication, March 4, 2020).

Dottie took the same approach to designing lessons. She explained:

If eight kids, different kids, needed a different way of presenting or a different test, even though with the same information, the same subject, I would make it fit those kids individually. It was a lot of work but I did it. (personal communication, March 4, 2020)

This appeared to align with her inherent philosophy, described by Dottie as “my instructional philosophy is that you teach the kids at their processing level” (personal communication, March 4, 2020). This could be overwhelming for some teachers, but for Dottie, “once I got to know the kids, it was easy-peasy” perhaps because “I also had two paraprofessionals in my classroom” (personal communication, March 4, 2020). She continued with confidence: “it moves smooth when I was prepared” (personal communication, March 4, 2020).

Dottie explained that “My purpose as a teacher is to, put myself, it was to, I am very empathetic” (personal communication, March 4, 2020). However, Dottie appeared determined when she asserted that “I expected, and the children knew, I taught them expectations” (personal communication, March 4, 2020). Dottie showed her empathy through the use of performance assessments within her classroom:

I love project-based learning and when the kids, when we would focus on their likes, because if you get children that are, that are chronic behavior problems, you, you reach them by stuff that they like, if they don’t like it, they’re not going to put any effort into it. (personal communication, March 4, 2020)



Dottie did not treat these students any differently than mainstream students in the detracked program. When it comes to scoring assessments, “They earned what grade they got” (personal communication, March 4, 2020). However, she sometimes wondered about trade-offs in including these students within the regularly functioning detracked classroom, observing that “I think that, had they been in a regular classroom, with lots of support, they could have been better at social skills. They could have been better functioning in larger groups or large settings” (personal communication, March 4, 2020). Still, Dottie thought “there are some students that can only survive in a small environment and with lots of support and could not, well, could not function” (personal communication, March 4, 2020).

### **Evelyn**

Evelyn descends from a long line of educators and decided to join the profession herself after realizing that she did not want to pursue a PhD. She taught at private school for 2 years and has been teaching at her current school for 12 years. This year, she is teaching seniors. When describing their readiness level and ability, she chuckled and said, “20% of my students are like, they’re ready for college. The others, they’ll be ready after college kicks them in the butt” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). When comparing her current position to her previous, though, she admitted that “in public schools, I’d say the teaching is really stronger” and observes that “I have colleagues who I can really talk with” (personal communication, March 5, 2020).

When designing lessons, Evelyn appeared to think a great deal about “exposure to the bigger context” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). She also acknowledged that “I want to give them opportunities to fail, without there being so high stakes” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). Evelyn liked the idea behind performance assessments because “writing should

have a purpose and an audience” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). She paired this approach with an interesting take on grading, describing it such that “I don’t put grades on their assignments, each semester I just have them do like a contract grade” (personal communication, March 5, 2020).

Evelyn was quick to assert that the strongest learning outcomes are achieved when students can “think about something that they initially dismissed or sounds really hard, but end up really proud of the product” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). In fact, Evelyn held that “the learning doesn’t really happen until they kind of reflect on what worked, didn’t, and sometimes what they learn is like ‘Oh, this wasn’t successful because of x, y, or z thing” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). Overall, Evelyn’s purpose as a teacher seemed to center on “exposing them to different ideas, different ways of looking at text, different ways of looking at themselves or the world” (personal communication, March 5, 2020).

Evelyn spoke with amazement in her voice when describing the effects of performance assessments on her classroom. She described: “And so I was able to just be like, okay, this is what you need to work on, this is where it’s working, this is where it isn’t, and just kind of talk about the product” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). Moreover, she expressed relief that “it takes the stakes out of every single assignment being absolutely perfect every time” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). Thinking of students, Evelyn said that “they can experiment, and see what works for them” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). Within her own experience, she acknowledged that “And I’m not like, reading something just to justify a grade but rather, you know, respond to their piece of writing” (personal communication, March 5, 2020).

However, Evelyn observed a learning-curve when first implementing performance assessments, especially in that “students who are really high-functioning and are used to getting really high grades and like being secure about that from early on found it a little unnerving to not know until like, kind of the very end” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). Despite this, Evelyn was confident that “most of them have really liked it” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). As an added bonus for Evelyn, it has “basically eliminated all conversations about grades” (personal communication, March 5, 2020).

In describing differentiation techniques, Evelyn explained that “I kind of try to break down the skills into very specific components” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). She seemed excited when explaining why she does this, observing that “I think that is like beautifully differentiated and beautifully scaffolded. And so I have students who, are really struggling readers, man they like, get into this text, and feel really confident with Shakespeare” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). Evelyn further explained that “I have like, different levels of choice and let students choose. And maybe I give you some sentence starters, or maybe even some research” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). Evelyn noted she always keeps students in mind, explaining that “I’m really thinking about what do I really want them to learn about this?” (personal communication, March 5, 2020).

At the same time, Evelyn appeared to become remorseful when thinking about the students who sometimes are challenged in a detracked classroom. She was reflective in explaining, “Because I want their final, I want them to leave high school having written a, like an analytic, like literary research-ish paper. And then, the kids who struggle just didn’t do it” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). Furthermore, Evelyn was frustrated when she explained, “I tried to differentiate for them, I tried to scaffold for them, and they kind of shut

down, and got really confused and frustrated” (personal communication, March 5, 2020).

Evelyn thought this could have resulted from lack of outside support because “we just don’t have any tutoring or support for them” (personal communication, March 5, 2020).

Evelyn mused on the difference between a detracked class and an AP class that she has taught. She explained,

I’ve almost always taught a co-taught class, and I’ve had some amazing co-teachers who have really helped me to really differentiate that curriculum. And, whereas the AP, I have not figured out how to do that as well. Or have the time to do it, or the need frankly. (personal communication, March 5, 2020)

She further considered and then added, “I think the AP class teaches in a different way” (personal communication, March 5, 2020).

A trade-off for Evelyn stemmed from differences in individual classrooms. She observed that “one thing our school does not really have is consistency and curriculum between teachers” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). She was also unhappy with professional development opportunities, sighing when she stated, “school-based PD is always a joke” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). There was skepticism in Evelyn’s voice when she observed that “frankly, what I think they’re calling differentiations are just modifications” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). However, she was able to describe one positive experience:

We had a PD run by a teacher in our department, where we looked at a lesson that a teacher had donated. And, you know, applied, you know, process modifications, product, and content modifications, and with like, applied those ideas to the lesson and we had a good conversation about it. (personal communication, March 5, 2020)

When it comes to other supports, Evelyn explained that “the way the specialized funding works, it’s basically impossible to get any kind of support” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). She further observed that “even like a place for kids to take tests, that’s gone, there’s no money or infrastructure for any of that” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). Evelyn was thoughtful for a moment and then added, “My absolute wish would be that all teachers were required to be, all high school teachers were required to be dual-licensed. Like in a content area, and then in special ed” (personal communication, March 5, 2020).

### **Frannie**

Frannie came from a family of educators, but she initially wanted to combine her love of traveling with teaching. She spent a semester abroad in Europe, and then pursued her Masters in TESOL. Frannie spent 2 years teaching English in Taiwan at an International High School and ended up back in the United States teaching in California and Nevada. She started her current position after realizing that there were not any jobs available that aligned fully with her TESOL goals, and she has been in this school for 5 years. There is a small immigrant population in this area; Frannie observed that “we’re kind of getting kicked back from a lot of policies regarding that because a lot of my students are undocumented” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). Frannie had some reservations about the detracking, explaining this situation “and then they want to like combine into the regular classes, but a lot of these kids are new, I mean we have asylum seekers, we have refugees, unaccompanied minors, because they’re homeless” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). Frannie noted she has taught every English class in the school, but this year, she is focusing on ninth-grade students and helping these newcomers to the program.

To meet these needs, Frannie explained that “we do a lot of scaffolding. We don’t believe in lowering the standard of education or lowering like what it is we want them to accomplish” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). Frannie said that at other times, “I group them based on the activity” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). In designing lessons, “I backwards plan and then I think of these central questions,” Frannie explained (personal communication, March 5, 2020). She described her primary focus: “So it’s always relating whatever theme, whatever objective, content standard, is how can I relate it to my students, their unique experiences in their language and culture?” (personal communication, March 5, 2020).

This approach was central to Frannie’s curriculum philosophy. In describing her viewpoint, she explained that “if they don’t feel safe, if they don’t feel validated, if they don’t feel like you actually care about them as a person, they’re not going to be able to learn” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). Therefore, for Frannie, “their success really depends on the culture and climate of the classroom” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). Learning outcomes can be achieved when this is accomplished, Frannie asserted: “it’s making that like, one-on-one connection” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). When describing her purpose as a teacher, Frannie admitted, “I feel like I’m just a vehicle to get them to where they want to be” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). To figure out where that is, Frannie said, “I sit down and have at the beginning of each semester, I have the students write down like their goals” (personal communication, March 5, 2020).

Frannie was very positive in the way she described performance assessments and her classroom:

Can you show me by building something, by making something, by creating something, because that shows knowledge...anybody can do a multiple choice and just guess, and that doesn't really show knowledge, just shows that they're good at taking a test.

(personal communication, March 5, 2020)

Frannie noted she keeps each individual student in mind, explaining "I do have a standard rubric, but I also know like, what each student is capable of" (personal communication, March 5, 2020). Furthermore, she described:

Sometimes I give students choice...I think student choice really leads, because they get to pick how they want to learn, you know, it's creating from them that they've learned based on that unit...you get to pick the topic, you get to pick within parameters. And I think it helps them and they get excited about it. (personal communication, March 5, 2020)

Frannie expressed some resentment when describing her classroom focus and the reality of life outside school walls. She lamented, "that's where the frustration lies, and knowing that there are still a lot of state managed tests and national testing and the students are going to have to do multiple choice, but really it's about the skill around the test" (personal communication, March 5, 2020). Frannie also acknowledged that many teachers feel quite differently, expressing that:

There's been a lot of kind of resentment, a lot of teachers who've been teaching for years and years and this is like the kind of status quo, they they've been a lot of hard feelings I guess going from totally different way how to assess when they just have multiple choice and that's on they've been doing it. (personal communication, March 5, 2020)

Frannie further noted that “it varies by state by state, school by school, program by program” (personal communication, March 5, 2020).

When describing the school’s common performance assessments, Frannie was to the point in explaining, “It’s an essay” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). Frannie explained the collaborative approach from an educator standpoint: “We kind of grade each other’s essays, to make sure that we’re being fair and equal, and to make sure that we have the same standards across the grade level” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). Frannie acknowledged that this can be hard, but worth it, stating that:

you have to give feedback to the students but really, I’ve seen a lot of student growth and motivation. Because if you sit down and you’re like, this is where your writing is, and now it’s almost like a portfolio, where they can see when they first started here and now, however long they’ve been in school, we keep all their essays. (personal communication, March 5, 2020)

Frannie noticed that detracking can be hard for students because “Some students feel like they’re not progressing at all. Well, you want to just motivate them and tell them like where you’re at, your, everyday they’re improving, you know” (personal communication, March 5, 2020).

Frannie confidently described professional development and supports, suggesting that “they pay for our training, and also with conferences...but the district has a lot of training, too. We’re pretty supported here” (personal communication, March 5, 2020). In fact, Frannie described other human resources that are available, including “a psychologist and like a social worker on site” and saying that “any of the parents of the students can come here, too” (personal communication, March 5, 2020).



**Gwen**

Gwen has been teaching for 2 years, after deciding that nursing was not quite as interesting as she had hoped. She currently teaches sections of detracked English 11 as well as AP Language and observed that “I find myself diversifying everything that I do more and more as I get further to AP” (personal communication, March 6, 2020).

In describing her experience, Gwen explained, “So, a general day would just look at least half it would be test prep and then other stuff would be standard-based, which honestly the test aligns really well with our standards so it’s really easy to double good” (personal communication, March 6, 2020). Gwen seemed energetic and said, “I really believe in positive incentives” while further observing that “They hate doing the practice, but they love doing the vocab [competitions]” (personal communication, March 6, 2020).

Gwen’s voice was comforting when talking about her educational philosophy, which is that “any kid can learn as long as you remove those obstacles” and feels that the “strongest learning outcomes is a safe environment” (personal communication, March 6, 2020). Moreover, she noted that because she is at a “Title I School,” they have to work toward this, as “it’s just, it’s lower income. So there’s a lot of just behavioral issues” (personal communication, March 6, 2020).

Within her classroom, Gwen explained that “my purpose is simply to connect the dots” and stresses that “my main purpose is facilitator” (personal communication, March 6, 2020). Gwen observed that “our administer likes us as a department to give assessments, summative assessments, every two weeks” and said that “we have like a map as to which standards we’re supposed to be teaching” (personal communication, March 6, 2020). When it comes to these traditional assessments, Gwen admitted that:

I don't put a whole lot of stock into those tests, only because I feel that kids do learn differently or think but I have like a, like an end goal, and sometimes those are trying to get them to that end goal, way too soon...we have to give them as specific times, so it's not like I can give it to them when they're ready. (personal communication, March 6, 2020)

In order to differentiate within her classroom, Gwen explained that it starts with:

being aware that every student like, I'm sure you know all about this, you know kinesthetic learners and visual learners, and even trying to tie all of that into one lesson plan, and those little formative checks oftentimes you don't have time to do those formative checks. So, it just, I don't know, it just, it seems like a lot of testing sometimes. (personal communication, March 6, 2020)

In evaluating students, Gwen noted that "I kind of look at where I think that every single student should be" (personal communication, March 6, 2020). She went on to explain:

Honors, I usually expect them to be a little bit ahead of that, because they are honors....The difference with AP is just that I'm teaching to an AP test...so like the beginning of the year I didn't expect them to be as far as I would, say, you know, now going into March. (personal communication, March 6, 2020)

Gwen did not see a significant difference between her detracked Honors classes and her AP class. She explained:

I mean Honors versus AP, so honors students are willing to work hard, but oftentimes they're not willing to put in that extra, extra little bit, like they'll work hard in class, will usually do their homework, I don't give a whole lot of homework, because the kids just don't do them...there's still a call to get close to 60, to 40% of them who don't do the

homework still, even knowing that it's an AP class. (personal communication, March 6, 2020)

Gwen donated her time to ensure that students who are motivated can be successful. She explained that "It's extra time on me, but it's also extra time on them that they're taking the time to walk. And yes, I noticed a huge difference" (personal communication, March 6, 2020).

Moreover, she noted how she tells her students that "I'll help you guys, but you know, you got to come in" (personal communication, March 6, 2020).

Gwen was fairly positive when discussing professional development provided by her school. She gave examples of school expectations, such as "making sure that we have the objective up on the board at all times, making sure that we're meeting that objective, making sure that there's a different component for each individual learner" (personal communication, March 6, 2020). Gwen elaborated further, stating the following:

We're really big into turn and talks. Just to solidify that just engagement with their peers because there's so many classes that they don't get to talk, and it really for some kids, it really helps. So, yes, we've done a lot of professional development on stuff like that. (personal communication, March 6, 2020)

Gwen returned to this strategy to share that "Actually, I went into classes and I noticed too when I was doing observations for a walk through, turn and talks just weren't implemented or if they were talking it wasn't about, yeah, exactly" (personal communication, March 6, 2020).

Gwen put some of the onus of successful differentiation on students, suggesting that "the kids also have to come in with the mindset that they want to learn" (personal communication, March 6, 2020). She further elaborated that "I always communicate with them one on one. I call home. Also, a lot of teachers don't do that" (personal communication, March 6, 2020).

**Greg**

Greg has been teaching for 23 years. He originally was interested in law school but changed his mind after a year of study in Italy. Greg is teaching sophomore English this year and observed that “the readiness is kind of all over the place” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). However, he noted that in describing the school’s small immigrant population, “the students from overseas are very motivated. And so, whatever discrepancy they have in preparation, they make up for it in motivation” (personal communication, March 9, 2020).

Greg excitedly listed a number of strategies that he utilizes with his students, such as “literary circles with you, a small group, and large group discussions, Socratic dialogue” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). He also took a hands-on approach with conferences, explaining that:

I have to take control of a one to one consultation with, with their essays, so I’ll give them a pass for their other classes, or before or after school, and I find that if I do, just let them read over their essays, they don’t really take the feedback. I have to make sure that the feedback sticks when I go over their essays with them. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

Greg also viewed his purpose in a clear-cut manner as follows: “teach kids that failure is only information” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). He explained that “If you get a, an F on an essay or a reading or reading test. That’s just information for them to go back and assess what, what they need to fix” (personal communication, March 6, 2020). Greg thought the strongest learning outcomes are achieved when “the students feel like they have the control and power over their brain” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). He felt can help them get

there, confidently asserting that “that’s kind of how I see myself as, as the guy definitely helps them get to where they want to be” (personal communication, March 9, 2020).

Within the classroom, Greg observed that “I suppose I just try not to do the same thing over and over and over again” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). When it comes to student perceptions, Greg noted he assures that “it doesn’t matter to me whether they’re honors or regular” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). He further elaborated that he simply looks for areas of improvement “and then, once I start, I start knocking out those, those easy fixes. That’s when I start pushing them again for, for more long, so for kids who don’t develop style” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). Greg went on to explain:

And usually, five different things on the rubric that, that haven’t focused on, so it’s all kind of spread out equally. When I want to grade essays, to this overwhelming and so titled towards one, one aspect of the writing complex is, I want you to understand the complexity of it but also not overwhelmed. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

Greg pointed to this as an advantage of differentiation and detracking, explaining that “for me, like I said, it says a lot of it’s in the feedback, and a lot of it’s in the grouping, the organizing and working together” (personal communication, March 9, 2020).

Greg noted how he tackles most of the complexity on his own. When asked about professional development, he did not pause before asserting, “professional development is the bane of every teachers’ existence of almost all of it. I mean, it seems like a lot of it is either the same stuff repackaged and something new, or it’s not very useful” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). After further deliberation, he added, “I’m not saying it’s all bad. The nuggets are few and far between” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). Still, he listed areas where he could use support, adding, “That’s been a very necessary thing, you know, so that kind of PD,

with the, heck with the technology, and the software, that's come in over the years...I never had any PD on Turnitin.com, kind of had to do it on my own" (personal communication, March 9, 2020).

### **Hannah**

Hannah graduated from college in 2008 during the recession and joined Youth Corps. Her time spent working with at-risk teens in that program encouraged her to complete an alternative routes program and become a teacher full-time in 2010. She currently teaches a detracked English 10 and Advanced Placement Literature and Composition. When describing the readiness of her sophomores, Hannah explained that she has "to kind of figure out what they, what they're into, what they like and that kind of motivates me to fix the problem areas because they, they're not as strong writers as last group, of last year's group was" (personal communication, March 9, 2020).

When asked about the instructional design behind the day's lesson, Hannah started her explanation with the first encounter of her students:

Okay, so basically, the first thing I do with my students, the very first week, very first day is we write short, what I call flash fiction, and it's usually a really fun way to introduce students to the class, and they have to write a short story. It's only, it's under 50 words, and has some type of a twist, and usually that kind of a really short way of me kind of seeing what their writing abilities are, are they able to think critically and come up with, you know, are they looking at word choice, how you know how boring are the stories. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

Hannah also explained the necessity of flexing to her students' interests, observing that "I really liked the classic sometimes but a lot of my students are very diverse, they don't want to

read old white man literature” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). For her, the strongest learning outcomes are achieved when students are “reading as often as possible and writing in conjunction with the reading” (personal communication, March 9, 2020).

Hannah paused when considering her purpose as a teacher, allowing that “I’m finding a lot of my students really aren’t meant for secondary education...they don’t like school they don’t want to do anything with the academic aspect” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). With this in mind, Hannah explained that “I try to find things that I guess that will leave a lasting impression, so they can learn about conflicts from attacks and then use that to kind of make choices or life impact their decision-making skills” (personal communication, March 9, 2020).

Hannah was confident in her classroom environment, as she noted:

Well my expectations are usually max, and usually exceed expectations because they’re invested, I’m invested, and it shows that I’m invested with them as a citizen...I try to make the class a safe space, but also one where we can argue and kind of debate.

(personal communication, March 9, 2020)

However, she noted the potential disadvantage in detracking by observing “Yeah, when I have kids that are struggling level one readers you know they’re really hurting they hate reading, they hate coming to English class” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). Even the fact that detracked classes are referred to as Honors changes her judgment, as she noted “I guess I’m more harshly with honors kids than I am with the regular but general kids, mostly because if you sign up for honors you’re kind of signing up for the challenge” (personal communication, March 9, 2020).

To face these issues, Hannah focused on differentiation. She explained:

So that's where you have to differentiate like, how am I going to make this smaller?

How am I going to chunk this for him, make this a little bit more simple? I want the critical thinking to the new there, but I also need to maybe scaffold a little bit for him and front load some information that will be more helpful. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

Moreover, Hannah thought that sometimes it is out of her control regarding which issues she notices, such as "some of them are maybe not getting enough sleep at night" (personal communication, March 9, 2020).

When asked about supports, Hannah was candid in her answer when she conceded: "I hate to bash my school but one of the worst things they do is professional development" (personal communication, March 9, 2020). Hannah acknowledged that a great deal is left to the teacher and with:

so many different degrees of knowledge and ability that you really have to almost group the class into like clumps or use peer buddies, or. These are things that you have to try out so, and a lot of teachers don't like to do them because it's a lot of work to say like here's this group you're going to work on this and maybe this group over here because you guys are kind of bright and I think you're up to the challenge. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

She further reflected on supports, observing that "I think administrators would like to think that teachers are prepared by having like mentors" (personal communication, March 9, 2020).

Hannah even seemed somewhat dejected while noting the ways detracking affects ELL students, that "as a teacher, you have to embrace that student, and that's a hard thing to do,



though, when there's the language barrier and you still have like 30 other kids that you have to teach" (personal communication, March 9, 2020). She explained further that:

We have to almost individually assess the students, but unfortunately have like a TA that kind of does a little pull out with them and helps them with assignments, but there's not like a pull out class where they all kind of meet together and have like a teacher that works with them on those types of things. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

Hannah thought performance-based assessments can actually help in these instances because "projects are usually not a problem, or, you know, ELL learners are usually pretty motivated" (personal communication, March 9, 2020). A bigger disadvantage would be that the school is "kind of moving away from literature" (personal communication, March 9, 2020).

### **Irene**

Irene wanted to be a teacher from the time she was in sixth grade and has been working at her current school for 15 years. She teaches a detracked course for freshmen as well as sections of AP English. In explaining how the district identified detracked courses as a way to meet a variety of student needs and provide academic challenges, she explained:

My district, the way they identify on a matrix, they purposefully over-identify gifted because we under-identify the minority. So, in an effort to capture more Hispanic or African-American gifted kids and actually identify them, they override by across the board. And so we did that, are like classified as, who really, are just kind of good students, not really gifted students. And we have kids who are like ESL but maybe they're not as excited as ESL but they struggle in English as kids who like English, is like they're the humanities and stuff, that's their specialty, because GPA is usually towards one area across the board, though we act like it's across the board here, so they have to

take pre-AP and AP classes, we don't have any other options. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

Irene went into further detail, asserting that:

The state's plan for the gifted equates AP with GT even though it's not, that's not accurate for one thing, so by offering AP classes are like pretty much, forcing GT kids to take AP classes, then the district and the state consider that meeting their educational needs. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

Irene was passionate as she continued elaborating on her concerns:

How does it impact student outcomes? Well, there's a big subset of GT kids who don't do well here and they end up, there's kids whose GPA is affected because they might take an on-level class, they have to take a pre-AP class, and they don't do as well. Kids are stressed out and overworked because they're taking seven seniors the first and only take one college-level course really, but with all the pre-AP that's also a lot of work and they are just overworked and stressed out. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

Irene addressed these students' needs through various instructional practices, explaining that "I walk around to a group and talk to them. And I try to do that as much as possible" (personal communication, March 9, 2020). She went on to describe that this might be "a conversation about like the subtleties of what they're doing, are pushing them to go farther than just correcting mistakes and trying to help a group that struggling get up to standards" (personal communication, March 9, 2020). In addition, "they get to pick who they work with" (personal communication, March 9, 2020). Irene revisited her previous explanations to explain that "as a way of differentiating, I mean there's two different buttons, two different levels for an A" and suggested the following:

I'd probably walk around and like give individualized help but sometimes I might specifically assign parts, based on skill level...If there's an option of different texts I will steer kids towards the texts, but that I think is better for them but for this project of course they're all reading the same text. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

Irene was also thoughtful when explaining her overall academic approach and the process in which students engage in learning:

I have them reading at home and I know that they're not necessarily going to understand all of it which is hard on them, they hate that, but I think it's good for them to struggle with it. To annotate it. Some of them may have looked at guides to help them or even copy somebody else's annotations, but I don't really mind because what we're going to do is actually watch the scenes that I care about ... And then at the end, hopefully I can connect it to a project they're doing. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

This performance assessment is core to Irene's instructional philosophy, in which she explained that "kids need to learn by doing" (personal communication, March 9, 2020). Irene thought this would lead to strong learning outcomes because "when kids are interested in what you're telling them, either because they wanted to learn it themselves or because they see the usefulness of it, and when it's at the right level for them so you know," they will be successful (personal communication, March 9, 2020). Her perceived purpose as a teacher is "to provide students with opportunities to, to learn about and look at things that they wouldn't do on their own, to guide them through new skills and into, share reading with them to show that they wouldn't see normally" (personal communication, March 9, 2020).

Irene was consistent in describing her use of performance assessments because "I just flat out don't give multiple choice tests....actually, we'll do multiple choice like, we'll start it pretty

soon to prepare for the state test” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). However, for the most part Irene’s overall focus was:

Aligning what we do in class to the assessment at the end because it’s a project or paper, like if it’s an essay it’s really obvious to them when we’re talking about writing, how that translated into an essay, but I’ve realized that it’s not always obvious to them when I say things in class about the text that I expect them to then use or build on those things for their analysis of essay, because I had a student just the other day ask, “So are we allowed to say in our outline the things that we talked about in class because we talked about that a lot?” (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

Irene felt that performance assessments do give all learners a better chance at succeeding, and described her grading technique as one where “I thought that so if you put in the effort to write the paper, do the project, and at least has a passing resemblance to what you were supposed to be doing, in the 70s” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). She compared this to more traditional forms of assessment, where:

If it were a multiple choice test, like on the vocabulary quiz you can see it, they may be bombing it. So you’re doing terrible and then that grade just is the grade, right, like a 40 is a 40, but and English is so subjective all the time that you know, I instead I just give like, did you meet the standard? (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

Irene noted she has also considered student perspective as an influence to her own personal perspectives, describing her students and how “they talk about the need for like, the need for education to be in service of what they’re actually going to use in their real life” (personal communication, March 9, 2020).

When discussing professional development, Irene conceded:

So we have professional development at the beginning of the year for two weeks before school starts. And we typically do a six hour update at that time. This year we were supposed to be trying to align with the middle schools, but it just died. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

Irene felt that it was not only teachers who need supports, but rather the students:

The reason that kids fail out of our school is not their ability to do the work and frequently it's, it looks like laziness, but it's actually like executive dysfunction, like they have no idea how to manage everything that they have to do here. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

Therefore, to tackle those needs, she suggested:

We have a lot of tutorial opportunities, right, like there's class tutorials, but then there's also NHS tutorials, and failing grades get put on a growth plan so then that's a parent meeting and it was the parents, counselors, and all the teachers talk about, 'Here's what you need to do' ...I think we're about maybe 60% successful at identifying kids who actually need it, versus who just showed up early on a diagnostic. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

Even so, for Irene, the biggest disadvantage appeared to stem from inability to fully meet the needs of all learners every day. She lamented that:

we don't know how to train anyone how to deal with a kid who is like, they're ESL in AP classes, and they speak English, but they have features of their first language, and they don't understand the vocabulary the same level as native speakers, even though they're

like very, they're out of the program, and they were trying to teach them college level reading and writing. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

## **Julie**

Julie is a career-switcher in her 20th year of teaching. She was a news reporter directly out of college who worked with programs such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters until she realized that working with teens was something she wanted to do full-time. This is her sixth year at this school and she teaches both ninth- and 10th-grade English. In describing the range of student ability in her classes, she explained that they are “on average in my room are anywhere from a fourth grade reading level to, to college abilities, they really vary depending on where they're coming in from” but seemed urgent in expressing that “everyone can learn given the opportunity” (personal communication, March 9, 2020).

Julie described the different strategies that she uses in order to meet these diverse learners. She noted how she plans instruction in a way that “so giving everybody that thought opportunities to speak as well as to write and using sentence starters with speaking for those that are, their language ability is lower” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). Julie also considered student interest in her decisions, explaining that:

So, with our kids they like everything to be very usually, they like to use some, I use Google Classroom. And so whenever I can have them look at a film clip. Like from YouTube, or something like that. So I try to make sure that they're able to use the technology. So you know in designing lessons will be definitely looking at that and then looking at kind of what they like. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

Julie expanded upon her ideas, including “scaffolding, giving them more opportunities” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). She explained that in her classroom:

You know, I do a lot of speaking assessments. As far as formative, just you know, like check-ins, I have the kids come up and teach. So, definitely the more formative you know, summative are pressuring you, because my school is very test driven, but ya know I use a lot of formative assessment techniques, which is just everything from observing to exit tickets to, you know, like smaller items that they can, they can do either at the beginning of class or at the end of class just to, so I can see whether or not they understand the concepts. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

A downside to this type of assessment, Julie suggested, is that “I think there’s some kids that don’t understand that they’re actually graded” but again mentioned that “I give them several different opportunities, whether it be, you know, different options” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). Julie’s school has taken a similar approach in considering both summative and formative assessment, but Julie does feel a bit unique in her focus, explaining “Well, some classes have a 80/20, mine has 70/30, so it’s 70% summative, 30% formative” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). Julie’s voice became serious when she admitted:

I’m going to have kids in here in my class that can never get any higher than a C, and they may work really hard on a project but it’s still the same....And then I have, other kids are like, how come I’m not passing your classrooms? Because you don’t do any work and that’s what. “I can usually just tell my teacher I don’t speak English.” And I’m like, and how’s that work for you and they “Oh, they just gave me an A” and I said, “Well, that’s, that’s not fair, you know.” (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

Julie paused with frustration, and then continued to explain, “we have a lot of kids where apathy is their main barrier to learning” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). She appeared to feel strongly that performance assessments help to address this because “you have to show me all

sides of whether or not you learned something...I have two kids that test very well. But do no classwork or put their heads down and you know I always tell myself, ‘That’s your choice’” (personal communication, March 9, 2020).

Julie then thought about her role in preparation for the students’ futures, allowing that “I want to make sure that they’re prepared for any situation, whether it’s filling out an application or writing a college thesis” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). She also felt that classroom environment is a huge indicator for student success:

Really setting the tone at the beginning of year as far as community. And not to be afraid to take chances in the classroom. I think if kids feel comfortable to, to just give it a try and then know that it’s okay if they fail, to have an opportunity to rework it and to get better, you know, to know that they’re supported. So definitely consistency in the classroom, consistency and the, the, the students are in a classroom. I think too often we see the schedule changes, and that type of thing. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

Julie mentioned that there has been some stark changes in the classroom in terms of teacher expectations that align with the learning mission, noticing,

a lot more schools are driven for, you know, actually seeing the lesson plans and making sure that we have our common curriculum and everything that needs to be in there so it’s, we have to have our right objectives and standards and central questions and you know agenda and all those different things that I think it’s changed quite a bit. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

In describing professional development aligned to these goals, she mentioned that “so like we have one of those meetings a month, where we’ll work on something. Is it be, you know,



classroom management or planning or, you know, vocabulary modifications or something like that” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). However, Julie felt more preparation is needed to help teachers with the task of differentiation because:

the state standards, that kind of shifted things as far as looking at the rigor and so there’s definitely some times where I think a bit more preparation on how to, how to work with like close text reading or how to work with higher level tasks. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

In supporting students, Julie allowed for the following:

I mean, if they kids want it there is tier support, as far as tutoring, AP classes, test preparation. At the use of computer our online type classes and how we have a tutoring through the local university. We have a center where university students come here and the kids, kids can get help, as well as to get college guidance. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

### **Karen**

Karen has been a teacher for 4 years. After earning her undergraduate degree in a different field, she worked for about 7 years and then returned for her master’s in education. During her hiatus, she realized that “I just loved working with people, I loved working with kids” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). She currently teaches ninth- and 10th-grade English, and has actually noticed a difference in students with the detracked Honors-designation:

I think that the thing that you see the most in honors classes here is their ability to stay organized and to work harder. It’s not necessarily that there’s a, you know, across the board ability, it’s just it’s just their willingness to work hard and their ability to, like, stay

on task which, utilize their time and they're able to analyze a little bit more thorough.  
(personal communication, March 9, 2020)

Karen had high expectations in order to help students perform at this level; she explained that “we try to get them to produce something every single day” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). This helps the teachers as well because “we can constantly find some sort of formative assessment with us. And then that informs how we are like, executing the information and whether or not it's planning, and it helps inform our instruction for the next day” (personal communication, March 9, 2020).

Karen elaborated on how she incorporates performance assessments alongside her daily instruction because “I feel more strongly about that now that I did, previously I have. I've seen them find success” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). She described this as “So we do a lot of projects and creative writing, it's much more project-based where they're doing writing assignments, short stories or they're building up, poetry portfolio” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). As she described the current academic focus of her students, she added “they're doing an external research component that goes along with that” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). Karen described this as a benefit to students because “I feel like they, you know, they have something that they end up completing, I feel like it's something that they're working towards. I feel like they're building on skills and building on ideas” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). She also considered differentiation and its role in allowing her to achieve these goals. Her approach included an understanding that “teaching is to break things into pieces, so that you know they're, they're pulling them together and understanding the individual ideas and building towards a greater whole” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). In fact, Karen suggested that “if I don't find a way to make the content accessible to

them, then the skill is, is something that is extremely difficult to even teach” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). She seemed excited when she described an anecdote where a particular student who spoke Spanish at home, as well as the process by which Karen and her teaching assistant followed to help a student understand connotation in a passage:

and so that is what made it accessible to her to be able to understand it in her own language. So by differentiating the, the terminology or the language for her, she was able to grasp, why you would use the word humiliated instead of embarrassed. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

With these student needs in mind, Karen noted that she tries to stay flexible:

I’ll take work all throughout the whole semester so something that I assigned in August I might be accepting and, you know, December before we go on break because kids always do the scramble at the tail end to try and get their grades up and try and pass the class. But, you know, I think that we’re trying to access all students at all abilities and all levels, and meet them where they’re at and trying to get them to elevate their own knowledge and information. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

Returning to the previous student she had described, Karen stressed:

those English language learners or those individuals with IEP, you know, maybe the point isn’t to hold their feet to the fire on something that is tedious or like making sure there’s a correct comma in the sentence if they have the analysis that I’m actually looking for. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

She returned to these ideas later when she explained the following:

I think that we have an incredible population with multiple cultures. I mean, I’ve really only touched on the Hispanic culture here but we have so many cultures and so many

different students and it's just, it's, it's got to be challenging for them to come to school and not their native language. They deal with a lot. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

Karen also thought learning outcomes would be stronger with outside assistance because “if our kids had an opportunity to cut down their external distractions, I think that they would find that they would, are much more capable than maybe they think they are” (personal communication, March 9, 2020).

Karen's purpose as a teacher also included creating a positive environment for her students because she has noticed that:

They just don't have reliable adults in their lives and so I feel like it is my responsibility to be someone that they can trust and be someone that is confident and is true and when they show up they know exactly what they're getting, there's no hidden agenda, then that way, they don't have to feel like guarded, they don't have to feel like, I'm going to pull the wool on the eyes, and that way they can just kind of meet in that space of, hey, we're going to learn and grow together. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

She admitted that the success in achieving this, “it just kind of depends, depends on the class, depends on the co-teachers, depends on the teacher” (personal communication, March 9, 2020).

Karen was not quite as positive when describing professional development for teachers surrounding performance assessments and differentiation within their detracking efforts. She admitted, “We are given credits to do professional development online. We also have professional development days, PD days. But I feel like they could be better” (personal communication, March 9, 2020). She added that “I would like it to be more meaningful to what,

the work we're doing" (personal communication, March 9, 2020). As far as student support, Karen mentioned that:

we have implemented a seminar class into our schedule. So, we have, it kind of functions like a homeroom, so I have a group of students who I see three times a week, and two out of the three days, they travel and can travel to other teachers, they can go get other work, they can work on their homework during that time. (personal communication, March 9, 2020)

## **Results**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand teacher perception of using performance assessments in detracked English classrooms. Emergent themes were clearly established from teacher observations across individual interviews, focus groups, and journal prompt reflections. These themes were coded within transcriptions of the audio-recordings I had gathered. This section highlights both the themes and relevant sub-themes of these findings.

### **Theme Development**

Analysis of the data revealed three main themes, with three subthemes each (see Table 1 below). These themes were identified through multiple readings of the data, with significant statements emerging and coded into nodes using NVivo software. The themes and subthemes are presented in Table 1. Table 1 is followed by discussion of each theme and its subthemes, including verbatim quotes from participants gathered in the various data collection methods. All quotes from participants are presented verbatim, which includes verbal ticks and grammatical errors in speech and writing to more accurately depict participants' voices.

Table 1

*Themes and Subthemes from All Data Sources*

Horizons	Theme	Subthemes
Wide ability range Individual Assessment Higher-level thinking Security to take risks High expectations Varied instruction Scaffolding, chunking, context Relevance Student Attitudes Component standards, chunking	Students Need Support	Classroom Environment Engaging Curriculum Scaffolding & Modifications
Differentiation is difficult Extra time Not enough support Praise for co-teachers Professional development poor Graduate school and experience Not all peers effective	Teachers Need Support	Differentiation is Time-Consuming Specialized Learning Needs Alignment of Professional Development
Metacognition, self-organization, critical thinking Self-efficacy and pride Student choice Cultural relevance Enthusiasm	Performance Drives Learning	Showcases Higher-Level Skills Creates Relevance Self-Assessment and Efficacy

**Students need support.** The first theme covers the needs of students, especially those in detracked classrooms. Teachers described classrooms in which “the readiness is kind of all over the place” (Greg), with students “anywhere from a fourth grade reading level to, to college, abilities” (Julie). This wide range of readiness levels requires intensive differentiation: a one-size approach to teaching simply does not work. Hannah observed “...You have to almost individually assess the students,” and noted that there are “so many different degrees of knowledge and ability that you really have to almost group the class into clumps or use peer buddies.” As I interviewed teachers, I noted an essentially universal commitment to doing their utmost to effectively meet the varied needs of their classroom, whether these needs came in the form of different readiness levels, socioeconomic status, or distractions and emotions driven by at-home circumstances. Teachers talked about adjusting to these needs through creating a safe classroom environment, delivering engaging curriculum and instruction, and introducing both differentiation and variety in their instruction.

**Safe classroom environment.** Teachers focused on the need to create a safe and supportive classroom environment as paramount for success in a detracked classroom. Karen observed, “They just don’t have reliable adults in their lives, and so I feel like it is my responsibility to be someone that they can trust,” while Frannie said, “...if they don’t feel safe, if they don’t feel validated, if they don’t feel like you actually care about them as a person, they’re not going to be able to learn.” The idea of the classroom as a “safe” space does not merely denote the physical and emotional “security you get when someone cares about you” (Adam). Adam clarified, “I mean security, feeling secure in who they are, and that they can take risks because they’re loved in that classroom, that type of security.” When students feel secure, they feel more comfortable taking risks in their education, engaging in debate and argument, and

investing themselves in their education to the degree that their teachers have shown their investment. Consistent and high expectations were also cited as a key to creating a strong classroom culture in which students of all readiness levels support and applaud each other's learning. Creating this kind of culture can seem a tall task, but most of the teachers agreed that genuine individual relationships were key. As Dottie put it, "... once I got to know the kids, it was easy-peasy."

***Engaging curriculum and instruction.*** Hand-in-hand with a supportive classroom environment goes curriculum and instruction designed to hold students' attention. Teacher perspectives on apparent student attitude problems varies. Hannah found that diverse students "don't want to read old white man literature," while Julie observes that "we have a lot of students where apathy is there main barrier to learning." Bob described a "low income district" as featuring "a lot of problems with efficacy and belief in oneself," while Alice saw students focusing on the question of "How fast do I get this work done and go on and do what I'd rather do?" Irene, however, suggested that "the reason kids fail out of our school is not their ability to do the work, and frequently it's, it looks like laziness, but it's actually live executive dysfunction, like they have no idea how to manage everything that they have to do here." Whatever the reason, teachers agreed that maintaining student focus is a task that must be planned for, and the common techniques include varied delivery of instruction and varied tasks, curriculum with cultural and especially real life relevancy, and the involvement of students in goal-setting, almost as if students are brought into a backwards-planning development of curriculum.

***Focus on scaffolding.*** As noted in the first two subthemes, teachers are well aware of the need to differentiate in detracked classrooms and to plan with the goal of driving student



engagement. They use a variety of planning and instructional techniques to achieve these aims. One of the main differentiation techniques describes is simply to vary instruction, within the unit, within the week, and several times throughout the class period. Many teachers begin with modelling or presenting a smaller chunk of a larger skill, with Evelyn informing me, “I kind of try to break the skills down into very specific components.” This was described by most teachers as an intense focus on scaffolding in order to avoid sacrificing rigor in a detracked classroom. At Frannie’s school, “We do a lot of scaffolding. We don’t believe in lowering the standard of education or lowering what it is we want them to accomplish.” A few teachers found scaffolding all the more necessary due to students not fully prepared for their classes. Carol said, “I’ll do a new technique that we build and build and build. And so first semester with me is hard because they’re never done these things before.” The ability to introduce new techniques is also supported by the classroom environment discussed in the earlier subtheme. Teachers carry out other differentiation techniques and ensure the involvement of students in discussions, individually, in small groups, and with the entire class in an attempt to drive critical thinking, and the secondary English teachers also point to writing-intensive lesson plans as important for student success. Assessments, especially failure, are “only information”: “[if you get an F on an essay or a reading or a reading test—that’s just information for them to go back and assess what, what they need to fix” (Greg).

**Teachers need support.** The second theme discusses the needs of teachers tasked with carrying out differentiation in detracked classrooms. This theme’s focus is somewhat inevitable given the use of teachers as the data source, but it highlights several important considerations regarding the experiences of teachers in detracked English classrooms. The teachers I collected data from were overwhelmingly supportive of their role as an enabler of student success,

perceiving themselves as a “facilitator” given that “any kid can learn as long as you remove that obstacle” (Gwen). Teachers were inspired by their own educational experiences and long to improve the lives of their students and society. To achieve success, teachers need to be supported in three main areas: a recognition that teaching detracked classrooms and using performance assessments is highly time-consuming; additional support, both within and outside the classroom, for students faced with rigorous coursework or special needs; and effective professional development that builds needed expertise.

*Differentiation is time-consuming.* The participants in this study described effective differentiation as a highly individualized process. Dottie said, “You had to meet them where they were, at their level, and everyone was different... It was a lot of work, but I did it.” When differentiation works, detracked secondary English classrooms become environments where learning grows as it bounces between the diverse perspectives of students. Bob described advantages for both high and low readiness students:

For the advanced kids, one of the greatest tools I found is having them teach, you know, not in a formal sense, not in a sense that would provide more work for them. But, you know, just within collaborative efforts within the classroom. They’re given a bit more a leadership role... For some of the lower-performing kids, when they start to see what’s actually possible, you know, what other teenagers are able to achieve, they start to, they start to have a little more confidence in themselves.

Carol noted that when students teach each other, it is like “they’re going through the metacognitive skills without even realizing it.” While unlocking students’ potential to teach other makes teachers’ work easy, teachers found most differentiation practices to be more work-intensive. For one, the very nature of varying student abilities, backgrounds, and readiness levels

makes it so that easily identifying a winning solution is not always straightforward. According to Dottie, “If something didn’t work, then I would go punch and figure out a way to get through to those kids that, because they all learn different, their learning styles were way different, the process totally different.” Higher-level students require perhaps even more bespoke attention, as shown in Carol’s discussion of teaching a gifted young writer: “I think there’s always room to improve with her, like I don’t dock her grade, but I’m harder on her about voice.”

Teachers must ask themselves not only how to simplify or chunk a lesson into parts that are accessible to all students, but also how to push each student’s critical thinking skills to the limit. Individual students may achieve differently at different tasks, so lessons and grading can and should be broken into component standards; for example, “a kid can identify author’s tone and author’s purpose without fully understanding punctuation and capitalization” (Bob).

Teacher 10 required students to attend one-on-one consultations to review essay feedback before or after school “to make sure that the feedback sticks.” The heavy personalization endemic to differentiation results in a heavy load on teachers, but the teachers perceive themselves as really having no other choice. Karen shared, “If I don’t find a way to make the content accessible to them, then the skill is, is something that is extremely difficult to teach.” According to Gwen, “It’s extra time on me, but it’s also extra time on them that they’re taking the time to walk. And, yes, I noticed a huge difference.”

***Specialized learning needs.*** Detracked classrooms require a great deal of differentiation, and students with special needs such as ELL or behavioral issues up the requirements even further. For example, an ELL student might find a detail of a story or word choice to be completely inaccessible in English, but fully able to grasp the nuances of the character when put in terms of their own language. Special needs students may receive modifications to

assignments and may need additional classroom support or additional time on assignments. Fortunately, many teachers describe special needs as being well-supported with high quality co-teachers. Evelyn expressed gratitude, saying “I’ve almost always taught a co-taught class, and I’ve had some amazing co-teachers who have really helped me to differentiate the curriculum.” School and state resources can play a major role in the availability of co-teaching support. For students with IEPs or behavioral issues, co-teachers seemed to be common, but teachers of students with limited English skills conveyed a lack of additional resources, with some considering attempting to learn Spanish themselves; however, Hannah observed that “ELL learners are usually pretty motivated.” Additional support for students is available, though this support is often offered outside of the classroom for students who actively seek it out rather than as an integrated part of the teacher’s differentiation strategies.

*Alignment of professional development.* Teachers are hungry for professional development on differentiation, detracking, and performance assessments, but they were withering in their assessment of the professional development offered at their schools. Colorful complaints abound, with (a) Greg describing professional development as “the bane of every teacher’s existence;” (b) Hannah hesitating to “bash my school” before nothing that professional development is “one of the worst things they do;” (c) Karen wishing “it could be more meaningful to the work we’re doing;” and (d) Brenda bluntly stating “I haven’t had any in my school.” The stakes are high when differentiation and detracking fail, so teachers are frustrated along with their students when they perceive their teaching as needing more support. Evelyn admitted, “I tried to differentiate for them, I tried to scaffold for them, and they kind of shut down and got really confused and frustrated,” while Frannie shared that “some students feel like they’re not progressing at all.” Most teachers expressed a personal feeling of competence,

though one gained largely from graduate school, conferrals with special education teachers, or previous posts. An additional criticism of the state of professional development can be found in teachers' assessments of their co-workers; Evelyn, for example, believes that for many teachers, "what they're calling differentiations are just modifications." Some participants were pessimistic about the possibility of creating effective professional development in this area, believing that the best professional development is simply experience. Others shared examples of software that they found and mastered independently, a supportive administration focused heavily on formative testing, the accountability created by standards-based lesson planning, departmental discussion of modifications to lesson plans, and coaching from a reading specialist on breaking down test questions. Despite a few examples of functional professional development, there were far more comments along the lines of Evelyn, who said, "School-based PD is always a joke," than praise.

**Performance drives learning.** The third theme that emerged was that performance drives learning. The participants described performance assessments as vital tools in detracked secondary English classrooms, beginning from the planning process. As Adam narrated:

I start with deciding what I want the end to look like and create a path for how to get there, it all kind of works together, so the assessments and the instruction go towards getting to that end state, and it may not necessarily be linear.

Performance assessments range from essays to plays to portfolios to in-depth research projects that take up the entire semester. For English teachers, the use of performance assessments seemed almost tautological, as many participants viewed most of the writing done for their classes as a form of performance assessment. According to Karen, "We try to get them to produce something every single day," while Evelyn found it useful to instill in students that all

writing “should have a purpose and audience.” Performance assessments, mainly in the form of written products, drive learning outcomes by stimulating higher-level skills, serve as a vehicle for relevancy, and promote student efficacy.

***Showcases higher-level skills.*** While the participants acknowledged the necessity of practicing multiple-choice for the purpose of state-mandated achievement tests, most participants were critical of multiple-choice tests and expressed a strong preference for written assessments. Multiple-choice exams are perceived as being too clumsy in denoting whether a student has reached a goal, while the participants are more interested in “building toward an essay, which has multiple standards attached: style guide, author’s purpose, citing textual evidence supporting inference, research projects” (Bob). Moreover, according to Bob, “teaching a kid to be able to organize their thoughts and express those thoughts with a specific purpose in mind really works to organize their mind.” Evelyn noted that performance assessments, especially the formative assessment of them, frees students to take risks in their thinking and form.

***Creates relevance.*** Performance assessments provide a vehicle for increasing the relevance of learning to students, which in turn improves their engagement and performance. According to Irene, “[Students] talk about the need for like the need for education to be in service of what they’re actually going to use in their real life.” Performance assessments, almost by definition, are concrete, real life tasks rather than abstracted classwork relevant only for one’s grade. Even a performance assessment about a relatively abstract topic such as literature is still a concrete piece of communicating a viewpoint. The use of performance assessments has “basically eliminated all conversation about grades” in Evelyn’s class, who now reads to “respond to their piece of writing” rather than “just to justify a grade.” Performance assessments allow students more leeway in choosing their topic or form, so they become more enthusiastic as

they choose subjects that are more culturally relevant, personally meaningful, or related to their future goals. Brenda brags, “They think they’re doing so much less work, but they actually tricked them into thinking that.” Even for behaviorally challenged learners or students with special needs such as ELL, “projects are usually not a problem” (Irene).

***Builds efficacy.*** One of the most important pathways for performance assessments to enhance student learning is through their impact on student efficacy. A record of performance assessments allows students to see “this where your writing is, and now it’s almost like a portfolio, where they can see when they first started and now, however long they’ve been in school” (Frannie). Karen said, “I feel like it’s something that they’re working towards. I feel like they’re building on skills and building on ideas.” Thus, performance assessments provide a concrete analog to the backwards-planning goals set by students and teachers, providing purpose for classroom periods, lessons, and units. Upon completion of the performance assessment, especially a larger overarching project, students can take full stock of their learning and “think about something they initially dismissed or sounds really hard, but end up really proud of the product” (Evelyn).

### **Research Question Responses**

The purpose of this study was to understand teacher perceptions of performance assessments in detracked English classrooms. The central research question that guided this study focused on how teachers describe the purpose and experience of teaching in this environment, including teacher approach to differentiation and the extent to which performance assessments stimulate effective learning. Explanations to each of these questions are presented below.

The central research question posited:

**CRQ:** How do teachers describe the purpose and experience of teaching in detracked secondary English classrooms?

The study participants described their experiences in detracked secondary English classrooms as largely positive, and most teachers noted their belief that all students are capable of meeting standards given proper support from the teacher. This support includes the creation of a classroom environment that allows students to feel safe, curriculum and instructional design that engages the students, and scaffolding for students' varying readiness levels. Teachers noted the importance of differentiation and individualized support, sometimes intensive, in detracked classrooms. Teachers described a feeling of confidence in their ability to meet the needs of their students, yet they also described the task of carrying out the necessary level of differentiation as difficult and time-consuming.

The first sub-question for this study was:

**SQ1:** How do teachers describe the instructional methods in detracked secondary English classrooms that use performance assessments?

Teachers noted a wide variety of instructional methods used in detracked English classrooms; indeed, many teachers specifically noted their efforts to vary instruction and student tasks in order to maintain student interest and support differentiation. Each teacher carries out instructional delivery both to the whole class, small groups, and individuals. Concepts are blocked into smaller parts and then built into a larger, more complex whole, with higher readiness students presented with greater complexity and depth, faster. Instructional design was often described as a backwards planning or standards-based process; in many cases, a



performance assessment serves as the goal for both teachers and students. Assessment practices rely heavily on writing products, usually essays, as performance assessments, graded with rubrics. Despite the focus on writing, the prevalence of state-mandated standardized tests caused teachers to also note practicing multiple choice exams.

The second sub-question was:

**SQ2:** What are the advantages and disadvantages of using performance assessments?

Teachers perceived performance assessments as driving students' critical thinking, providing opportunities for student growth and self-assessment, and providing a vehicle for meaningful teacher feedback. Additionally, performance assessments were described as introducing culturally responsive assignments and student choice, which teachers observed as supporting student engagement. The overall description of performance assessments as an instructional and learning tool was positive. Teachers noted a few disadvantages in terms of implementation, such as the more time-intensive grading versus traditional examinations and the occasional difficulty of achieving buy-in from teachers reluctant to depart from the status quo.

The third sub-question asked:

**SQ3:** How do teachers describe the professional development, support systems outside of the classrooms, and overall school culture regarding the implementation of detracking, differentiation, and performance assessments in secondary English classrooms?

Teachers were pessimistic about the state of professional development, especially regarding differentiation. Although most teachers expressed confidence in their ability to meet the needs of their students, this confidence either came from university, usually graduate, programs or the teachers' perceptions of competence gained from experience. With few exceptions, teachers regarded the school-provided professional development for differentiation,

detracked classrooms, and performance assessments as absent, lacking, or even a waste of time. Administrative support for detracking and differentiation varied by school, with support mainly coming in the form of extra tutoring or other supports for students who seek it out. Little direct support for teachers was noted outside of co-teachers in detracked classrooms with special needs students.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided detailed context about each participant in the study and information about the methodology through which the data was organized into themes and subthemes. This qualitative phenomenology made use of data from interviews, focus groups, and written responses to prompts. The collected data were read multiple times, with significant statements identified for the development of the three main themes: students need support, teachers need support, and performance drives learning. The common features of the participants' perspectives created the themes, though individual teacher perspectives inevitably differed in the details. Teachers were generally positively disposed to detracking and performance assessments, finding themselves up to the task of differentiation; however, the teachers generally expressed dissatisfaction with the state of professional development on these topics.

The data collected in this study addressed the central research question and the three sub questions. Teachers described the experience of teaching in a detracked secondary English classroom using performance assessments as a demanding, yet satisfying, experience. The teachers perceived themselves as capable of making a large difference in their students' lives, though achieving this positive impact can require a large amount of work and individualized attention from the teachers. A variety of instructional methods are used to differentiate in

detracked classrooms, especially scaffolding. Performance assessments are particularly valued for their role in stimulating higher-level skills, supporting student engagement, and driving student efficacy. Although there were some positive comments about professional development, the participants were overwhelmingly negative in their assessment of formal professional development offered on the study's topics at their schools.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### Overview

The purpose of this study was to understand teacher perceptions of using performance assessments in detracked secondary English classrooms. This study's participants were comprised of 14 educators from three high schools in Virginia. This chapter presents a summary of the findings, a theoretical and empirical discussion of these findings, implications of the study, delimitations and limitations, as well as recommendations for future research.

### Summary of Findings

In order to investigate teachers' perceptions of using performance assessments in detracked secondary classrooms, data collection occurred through one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and written responses from participants. I carried out phenomenological analysis, which revealed three main themes that described the experience of teaching in detracked secondary English classrooms using performance assessments. These themes were: (a) student need support, (b) teachers need support, and (c) performance drives learning. The themes combined to answer the central research question and the study's sub-questions.

The study's central research question asked:

**CRQ:** How do teachers describe the purpose and experience of teaching in detracked secondary English classrooms?

This research question was addressed through the answers and reflections that teachers provided in the various data collection processes. Participants defined their purpose as preparing their students to succeed and make a positive impact on society. Successfully teaching in detracked classrooms is thus viewed as a necessary, almost moral, obligation, and teachers view their students as capable of reaching high level of achievement with proper motivation and support.

Thus, the participants described their role as maintaining rigor in their detracked classrooms while offering intensive differentiation and scaffolding in order to deliver the material at a level accessible and stimulating to all students. Teachers described the creation of a supportive classroom environment as another crucial task, believing that students need a sense of security so that they can take risks in their learning. Student attitudes are often a challenge, and teachers highlighted the importance of varying instruction to maintain student interest and offering relevant curriculum in order to stimulate engagement. Teachers feel confident in their ability to deliver effectively differentiated instruction, create a supportive and engaging environment, and maintain rigor, with this perceived success providing a sense of satisfaction.

Despite the confidence and satisfaction of the study's participants, teachers noted the high time demands of a detracked classroom. Student readiness levels can vary tremendously, making it necessary at times to individually tailor curriculum or instruction to each student's unique needs. Lessons must be designed such that they are simultaneously engaging for college-ready leaders and approachable for learners who entered the class unprepared for high school English. Curriculum needs to be made relevant to students' interests and lives, which, like readiness levels, can vary greatly in diverse classrooms. Supportive classroom environments are built from genuine individual relationships with students, another rewarding, but time-intensive, task. The participants described teaching in detracked classrooms as fulfilling, but they also described a heavy amount of individualization that resulted in much more work.

The first sub-question for the study was:

**SQ1:** How do teachers describe the instructional methods in detracked secondary English classrooms that use performance assessments?

Teachers described instructional approaches in detracked secondary English classrooms designed to achieve two main goals: to maintain rigor while delivering instruction at a level accessible to all learners and to maintain engagement even when instruction veers from an individual student's ideal difficulty level.

The participants used a variety of techniques to carry out differentiation, many of which present information in chunks accessible to the less-prepared students but in the context of a more complex whole that make them meaningful for advanced students. Instead of beginning with simple skills and moving onto more difficult ones, complex skills are broken into specific components and modelled by the teachers. Lessons, too, are broken into component parts, preventing deficits in spelling or mechanics from depriving students of critical thinking opportunities. Students are involved in discussions with partners, in small groups, and with the whole class in order to give all students a chance to gain confidence and contribute. Advanced students are asked to clearly explain concepts, forcing them to gain a true understanding as they present material to their classmates. Above all, teachers rely heavily on scaffolding to maintain rigor, addressing each student's needs on an individual basis if necessary. Students are frequently assessed to gauge progress, provide feedback, and to instill an attitude that assessments provide information needed to grow. Teachers rely heavily on writing assignments, which provide an opportunity to push advanced students to new limits with engaging feedback and give less advanced students a chance to practice and gain basic skills. Writing and explorative discussion are believed to stimulate critical thinking among all students.

Teachers incorporate the need to engage students in all aspects of instruction. Although the participants believe that all of their students can succeed, many also conveyed that students must choose this. Motivation can be an issue for students of all readiness levels, with some

students becoming frustrated and shutting down when they encounter challenging material, while other students avoid pushing themselves in favor of rapidly completing their work. Instructional delivery and tasks are heavily varied in order to provide a change of pace. Curriculum is designed to incorporate materials and tasks with cultural and real-life relevance. Students are involved in goal-setting, for both their performance and for their learning goals. Whenever possible, students are provided with choice and opportunities to develop self-efficacy.

The second sub-question asked:

**SQ2:** What are the advantages and disadvantages of using performance assessments?

The participants generally defined performance assessments in English classes as writing assignments and did not limit this definition to large-scale projects, with assessments ranging from essays to plays to portfolios to long-term research projects. Thus, the instructional focus on writing assignments results in the frequent usage of performance assessments. Teachers believe that performance assessments are useful for creating a goals-based curriculum as well as the targeted learning outcomes for students. Furthermore, teachers described performance assessments, especially written, as stimulating higher-level thinking skills, self-organization, metacognition, and risk-taking on the part of students. Performance assessments are also believed to address some of the issues with student motivation, as they provide a vehicle for student choice in topic, approach, and style. This allows students to tailor the curriculum to materials and tasks that are most relevant to them and grants students choice that drives engagement and self-efficacy. The concrete finished product of performance assessments, especially larger-scale tasks, further supports self-efficacy by showing students their progress and the results of their efforts. Teachers described few disadvantages for performance

assessments in their classrooms, noting only occasional obstacles surrounding consistent grading across teams that could be overcome through rubrics and grade norming.

The third sub-question posited:

**SQ3:** How do teachers describe the professional development, support systems outside of the classrooms, and overall school culture regarding the implementation of detracking, differentiation, and performance assessments in secondary English classrooms?

The teachers perceived themselves as competent and up to the task of effectively differentiating in detracked classrooms, but they highlighted a clear need for stronger professional development, which was described as woefully lacking. Colleagues were not always perceived as correctly implementing differentiation techniques or maintaining rigor, and many teachers in the study admitted that their own abilities lacked initially before being gained through classroom experience. Despite their self-efficacy, many teachers admitted to frustrations with time-consuming differentiation practices that they perceive as necessary and occasional failures in reaching students. Teachers pointed out graduate programs as their main source of differentiation expertise, and a few discussed mentors or experiences at prior schools; almost no teachers perceived professional development at their current school as providing any useful material at all on differentiation and detracking. Professional development, especially regarding these topics, is either lacking or unproductive according to the teachers, serving more as a waste of time than even an inadequate program. The outlook is more optimistic in terms of in-classroom supports, with teachers praising the expertise and efficacy of co-teachers and other specialists if applicable, though students with special needs based more on demographics, such as ELL, were not perceived as receiving needed supports. A few schools offer additional



resources outside of the classroom for students who actively seek it out, but this support is not integrated into classroom differentiation strategies.

### **Discussion**

This study contributed to the empirical literature on detracking, differentiation, and performance assessments by presenting thick data from teachers in secondary English classrooms. The findings also contributed to the theoretical literature by confirming via teachers' perspectives some of the findings suggested by Vygotsky (1978) and more recent theorists regarding the social constructive theory of learning, such as Shabani (2016).

### **Empirical**

Previous studies on detracking, differentiation and performance assessments have identified several key features of successful detracking programs supported by differentiation. Bavis (2016), Burriss et al. (2006), Mehan (2015), and Weller (2017) provided examples of unambiguous success stories for detracking initiatives in secondary schools at classroom, building, and district levels. Common characteristics of the initiatives in these studies were intensive and highly tuned differentiation techniques carried out by teachers, schoolwide support systems, and cultures of high expectations. Achieving these conditions is not always straightforward, as shown by the more mixed results for detracking found in some quantitative studies (Domina et al., 2016; Kim, 2005; Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2016), which suggests a need for the thicker, more holistic data provided by qualitative research. The participants in this current study discussed their experiences as secondary English teachers attempting to provide the kind of support necessary for detracking initiatives to succeed. This investigation especially focused on the use of performance assessments as a differentiation technique in English classes and on the state of professional development regarding this issue.

Additionally, this qualitative research confirmed the necessity of highly intensive differentiation in detracked classes found in previous empirical work. Although previous scholarly research has not explicitly highlighted the time and effort described by the participants in this study, Tomlinson (2001, 2003) and Valiande et al. (2011) based their case for differentiation on the fact that student needs vary widely and are greatly influenced by socioeconomic factors, while Mehan (2015) described successful detracking programs that rely a great deal upon additional resources from university affiliations. The participants in this study described detracked classrooms with a huge range of student readiness levels and needs, with some students already prepared for college and others still yet to acquire basic writing skills or attain fluency in English. Watanabe (2006) found that in tracked systems, higher tracks have a higher concentration of college-bound students, while lower tracks contain most of the special education or ELL students. Teachers whom I interviewed agreed with many of the prescriptions of Faber et al. (2017) and Tomlinson (2003), that described instruction centered on assessing students on an almost individual basis, lesson plans that can be easily scaffolded as needed, grouping students into clumps, and a great deal of one-on-one attention. Valiande et al. (2011) found small, positive effects for differentiation techniques on student literacy. Teachers in this study perceived themselves as having a clear duty to effectively meet the needs of all learners but admitted that the amount of support needed by students was extremely time-consuming. An important facet of support noted by many participants was the creation of a supportive classroom environment that allowed students to feel secure enough to attempt to meet the participants' high expectations. Other researchers have noted expectations as playing a large role in student outcomes (Diamond & Lewis, 2015; Gamoran, 2009), but high expectations and rigor are often lacking in lower track classes (Mayer et al., 2018). As suggested by Tomlinson (2003), teachers

perceived individual relationships with students as paramount to creating this beneficial atmosphere, another time-consuming but fulfilling task for the study's participants.

Student engagement and attitudes were raised as important issues in detracked classrooms. Although detracking tends to shrink achievement gaps, it is true that low readiness students struggling with challenging materials or home life issues can shut down their attempts to learn, dampening achievement (Campbell, 2015; Diamond & Lewis, 2015; Domina et al., 2016). High readiness students can become bored with reviews of basic skills or exhibit a desire to simply achieve the minimum requirements as quickly as possible rather than push themselves, so the achievement of effective differentiation and student engagement is crucial in a detracked classroom (Diamond & Lewis, 2015; Domina et al., 2016). Diverse students can feel disengaged from traditional curricula, and students can become bored with monotony. During our interviews, teachers described their attempts to mitigate these issues with culturally relevant texts, increased student choice, aggressively varied instruction, and placing even basic skills within the context of a larger, more complex whole. Subban (2006) suggested involving students in the running of the classroom environment as a means of driving student engagement. Nonetheless, the participants in this study admitted that student efficacy and executive function remains a not fully solved problem in their detracked classrooms. In general, these teachers did not perceive themselves as reducing rigor in response to the detracked nature of their classrooms, an important feature since Rubin (2008) found that an excessive focus on relevance without high standards results in poor intellectual stimulation.

Performance assessments were described by the teachers in this current study as an important tool for learning in secondary English classrooms and overcoming some of the hurdles described above. Kim (2005) presented a meta-analysis showing that performance assessments

enhance achievement, though this effect was ameliorated by ability heterogeneity, perhaps the defining characteristic of detracked classrooms. Participants in this study perceived written assessments as a crucial mode of learning in English classrooms, stimulating the critical thinking that supports learning (Parkay et al., 2014; Tomlinson, 2001). According to Shepard (2000), performance assessments also provide a vehicle for feedback for students, in line with the framework advanced. Chen and Yang (2019) found beneficial effects for performance assessments in social studies. Most teachers considered performance assessments to be an extremely natural fit for English classes given that many writing assignments can be interpreted as or modified to become performance assessments. The act of assessment is intended to provide valuable information rather than judgment to students. Additionally, a focus on writing assignments as performance assessments provides a vehicle for providing students with choice on topic, approach, or style, which can aid in creating a more relevant curriculum or supporting student independence and efficacy. Choice, especially when combined with self-assessment, increases student efficacy and engagement in detracked classrooms, and also allows students to take part in some of the customization that can otherwise be time-consuming for teachers (Weller, 2017). Several of this study's interviewees bragged about how performance assessments tricked students into doing more work and embracing learning.

Although the study's participants all described themselves as capable of, consistent in, and satisfied with delivering quality, differentiated instruction, they also cited a large time burden and were almost unanimously withering in their assessment of the amount and quality of professional development. A minority of teachers also described colleagues who were not as capable of differentiating effectively, so it is not clear that experience and graduate programs, cited by many participants as the source of their competence, are fully filling the gap in

professional development perceived by the study's teachers. Effective differentiation depends a great deal on training, and it can take 7 years for teachers to redefine their self-conception into the necessary mindset needed for detracked classrooms (Hess, 1999; Tomlinson, 2001; Valiande et al., 2011). One of the study's most important findings is a large deficit in quality professional development for teaching in detracked classrooms and using differentiation on the scale necessary in these environments. Teachers were generally unimpressed by their current schools' supports and the quality, amount, and relevance of training. Modica (2015) discussed a lack of professional development support for a pilot detracking program that was eventually ended.

Overall, this qualitative study contributed to the existing literature by collecting thick data on the lived experiences of teachers of detracked secondary English classrooms. Successfully differentiating detracked classrooms is widely recognized in the existing literature as an important issue (Bavis, 2016; Mehan, 2015; Tomlinson, 2003) and this study collected the insights and perceptions of teachers who are closest to the phenomenon. Some of the tensions in the existing literature on the effect of detracking on achievement may be explained by the high demand that detracking places on teacher competence and time. This study also identified a clear need for and lack of professional development on detracking and differentiation that teachers perceive as useful or relevant. Specific characteristics of a supportive classroom environment, not just instructional techniques in differentiation, were also identified by the study's participants as playing a key role in differentiation success. Finally, teachers confirmed that performance assessments are a highly useful tool in detracked secondary English classrooms, offering a variety of instructional, cognitive, and attitudinal benefits for students.

## Theoretical

This study was fundamentally based on Vygotsky's social constructive theory of learning that views learning as a social process constructed through collaboration and interaction between students and teachers (Vygotsky, 1986). Key concepts that built on this theory, namely the ZPD that is unique to each student, suggest a high importance for differentiation in successful classrooms, tracked or not (Tomlinson, 2015). When socialized learning interactions occur in the context of a goal or purpose, such as that provided by a performance assessment, the effectiveness in driving learning becomes more effective (Shabani, 2016). By studying teachers forced to seek out intensive differentiation techniques by the wide readiness level ranges of their detracked classrooms, this study was able to examine some of the theoretical claims of the social constructive theory of learning.

Teachers' responses generally supported Vygotsky's conceptualization of learning, as the study's participants acknowledged and emphasized the individual needs of each learner, not just their readiness levels but also the background and experiences that drive student interests. Teachers perceived the classroom environment as playing a large role in driving student success and focused on creating the social relationships needed to build a supportive environment. Performance assessments, usually in the form of writing assignments, were used to add context and purpose to student assignments while also providing an avenue for the verbal interactions and assessments of quality that Shabani (2016) held are key for stimulating meta-cognition and productive dialogue in the ZPD.

The social construction of ZPDs in detracked English classrooms was described as occurring through exploratory discussion in groups of varying sizes in a classroom environment that offered a space secure enough for students to take risks. Fernández et al. (2015) suggested

that exploratory conversation can expand the reach of a group's joint ZPD beyond the individual ability of the most able learners or even the teacher whereas disputative conversation can restrict the joint ZPD. Thus, the study's participants were in agreement with many of the conclusions of social constructive theory through their descriptions of learning and through their pedagogical techniques. Teachers included exploratory conversation in their instruction as a means of providing critical thinking opportunities, especially for students who might be more limited in written expression. Despite the use of exploratory conversation as an explicit differentiation strategy and the theoretical potential for a socially constructed IDZ to surpass a teacher's knowledge and the dynamic nature of the ZPD in the context of social, goal-oriented tasks, many teachers emphasized the amount of time-consuming individualized attention that they carried out to achieve differentiation, and performance assessments were generally conceived of as individual projects.

### **Implications**

This study resulted in several theoretical, empirical, and practical implications from the data shared by the participating teachers. The implications for each area are discussed below.

#### **Theoretical**

This study was underpinned by Vygotsky's social constructive theory of learning. This theory describes learning as a social process occurring in the context of collaboration and interaction with others (Vygotsky, 1986), and the meaning of the phenomenon for participants was also viewed as being created through a similar process. In this theory, a ZPD is constructed by students and teachers in which the students' learning advances; the construction of a ZPD is unique for each student, emphasizing the importance and necessity of differentiation (Tomlinson, 2015). Instruction is a joint, fundamentally social, and dynamic dialectic between learners and

the teacher. Evaluative dialogue and exploratory conversation can enhance this activity (Fernández et al., 2015; Shabani, 2016).

The study's participants seemed to confirm all of the conclusions of theorists active in the social constructive theory of learning, though it is possible that this is simply a reflection of the participants themselves viewing and describing learning through a social constructive lens. Teachers seemed to place the highest learning value on assessed writing activities, believing these activities to force critical thinking and provide an opportunity for the goal orientation and language-based evaluative dialogue that several researchers have contended is crucial for social learning (Fernández et al., 2015; Mercer, 2000; Shabani, 2016). Teachers also relied heavily on discussion activities and noted the importance of supportive classroom environment in which students felt safe to take risks; this is in line with the ideas surrounding exploratory, rather than disputative, dialogue proposed by Shabani (2016).

### **Empirical**

This study adds to the current literature on the impact of detracking, the use of performance assessments as a means of differentiation in secondary English classes, and teachers' perspectives on detracking. The existing literature on detracking offers some conflicting results on the impact of detracking (Burriss et al., 2008; Domina et al., 2016). This study's results showed teachers who perceived themselves as highly committed to providing the necessary level of high-quality differentiation and believing themselves effective in doing so. The thick data on teacher perspectives may help resolve some of the conflicts in the existing literature.

Horn (2006) and Watanabe (2006) found that teacher attitudes on the nature of learning and ability heterogeneity were correlated with teaching styles. The teachers in this study



described positive attitudes toward student capabilities and adaptive modes of instruction, a correspondence predicted by Horn (2006). Teacher attitudes, instructional style, and adaptability may be key features of detracked classrooms not currently captured in the quantitative literature.

Performance assessments were highlighted by the study's participants as a powerful learning tool that offered a vehicle for both cognitive stimulation and fomenting student efficacy and engagement. The pairwise match of performance assessments, mostly in the form of written work, and secondary English classes seems to be a good fit. This confirms the existing literature's position on the efficacy of performance assessments as a cognitive tool (Kim, 2005; Shepard, 2000) and highlights as an additional advantage the ability to allow students to choose projects that are more relevant and meaningful.

### **Practical**

The participants in this study described the achievement of differentiation in detracked secondary English classrooms as a time-consuming and difficult, but necessary and rewarding, task. Although it is somewhat difficult to generalize this result beyond the study's participants, the study's participants did not exhibit any attitudes that would be predicted by Horn (2006) to result in ineffective differentiation. However, some participants did describe colleagues who were less competent at implementing differentiation techniques, and many noted the large time burden of individualizing instruction to each student's unique needs. Thus, a key practical implication of this study is the need for more professional development and support for teachers asked to take on detracked classrooms, as these classrooms are more demanding of teacher time than tracked classrooms and often need innovative techniques. It may be advantageous for professional development to focus on differentiation techniques that are specifically geared toward group or classroom-level instruction rather than the individualization described by many

of the study's participants. Individualized differentiation strategies are highly time-consuming, and social constructive learning theory suggests that instruction could potentially be more powerful in a group-based, goal-oriented social setting versus bespoke scaffolding (Fernández et al., 2015).

The practical implication of the confirmation of the existing literature on performance assessments is clear: performance assessments are perceived by teachers as a highly suitable mode of differentiating in detracked English classrooms and should be considered a viable strategy. Secondary English teachers should consider implementing performance assessments, paying special attention to their potential to serve as a vehicle for metacognition, evaluative dialogues, student efficacy, and student engagement.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Several delimitations and limitations should give caution when attempting to generalize this study's findings and conclusions. The study utilized a sample of 14 teachers to serve as a representative group, all of whom had taught detracked secondary English classes within the past 2 years. This timeframe was meant to ensure that all participants had experienced the phenomenon of interest recently enough to accurately recall their perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Another crucial feature of participants was their willingness to participate in the research, for which they were not compensated. It is possible that teachers who are less willing to volunteer for research studies would offer different perspectives on various issues or that teachers of different subjects or grade levels would view issues differently.

The nature of qualitative research unavoidably presents some limitations. The relatively small sample size makes the study less able to address certain questions compared to large-scale quantitative work; however, this study's thick, rich data on teacher perspectives adds valuable

context to the existing body of literature. As with any qualitative study, researcher bias must be acknowledged. In order to limit this impact, I followed the phenomenological processes of epoché and bracketing outlined by Moustakas (1994), including a reflexive journal (Appendix I) to record and reflect upon my research experience and note any biases that surfaced.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The purpose of this study was to understand secondary English teachers' experiences using performance assessments in detracked classrooms, collecting data from 14 teachers who had taught in a class satisfying the criterion within the past 2 years. Future research could benefit by focusing on performance assessments and detracked classrooms outside of English, as different subjects, especially those that do not translate as naturally to verbal communication and performance as English, could offer important different perspectives. The experiences of Weller (2017) and MacDonald (2017) showed that the most suitable differentiation techniques for detracked classrooms may vary by subject, so performance assessments may turn out to be less appropriate outside of English, or the innovations of another subject could prove useful for English teachers. Many scholars have suggested performance assessments to be increasingly useful as students advance (Kim, 2005), meaning a study that includes teachers of lower grade levels may have a different experience to report.

From a quantitative perspective, there have been a few recent large-scale studies or meta-analyses on either the effect of performance assessments (Chen & Yang, 2019) or the effect of detracking (Domina et al., 2016) on achievement, but not both, so there is a place in the literature for a high quality quantitative study that focuses on some of the issues raised in this research. This study used the perspectives of teachers, relying on their assessment of student outcomes and

focusing on the experience of teaching. This data could be triangulated with additional perspective from administrators or students in future qualitative work.

This study identified a clear need for further research into professional development regarding differentiation practices and instruction in detracked classrooms. The teachers in this study were brutal in their assessment of the state of professional development. Additional research on teachers' experiences in professional development, best practices for differentiation in detracked classrooms, and best practices in professional development could be of high practical value.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to understand teachers' experiences in detracked secondary English classrooms using performance assessments. Vygotsky's (1978) social constructive theory of learning formed the theoretical lens for the study, and the participants' responses fit neatly into this framework. One central research question and three sub-questions were answered through participant interviews, focus groups, and writing prompts.

The participants in this study revealed a deep commitment to maintaining high standards in detracked classrooms and making this rigor accessible to all learners. This task is achieved through an intensive approach to differentiation and a focus on creating a supportive classroom environment, both of which depend a great deal on individual attention for each student. Teachers described heavy workloads due to the intense customization and variation of instruction, as well as some challenges in maintaining student interest and motivation across all readiness levels. Performance assessments, usually written but widely varied in scope, offset some of these challenges by providing students with choices that can increase efficacy and

engagement. Teachers also view performance assessments as stimulating desirable cognitive skills.

Teachers had decidedly mixed reviews of the state of support for detracked classrooms. Professional development regarding differentiation and detracked classrooms was described almost universally as a complete waste of time; teachers found the amount, quality and content of programs offered by their schools to be lacking, with any expertise gained from graduate programs, experience, or mentors. Students with special needs often receive high quality support within the classroom from specialists, while the participants noted that students whose backgrounds create additional challenges often do not receive sufficient resources. Support systems outside of the classroom are often available for students, but only if the student elects to make use of them, and these support systems are not integrated with in-classroom differentiation efforts.

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**APPENDIX A: IRB Approval Letter****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

February 13, 2020

Susan Mahlburg  
IRB Exemption 4203.021320: A Phenomenological Study of Performance Assessment in  
Detracked Secondary English Classes

Dear Susan Mahlburg,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101(b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

(iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at

[REDACTED]

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
**Research Ethics Office**

**LIBERTY**  
UNIVERSITY.

*Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971*

**APPENDIX B: Recruitment Letter**

Date:

Dear Educator:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to understand how teachers describe the experience of using performance assessments in detracked English classrooms, and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are 18 years of age or older and are willing to participate you will be asked to (1) complete an online screening survey; (2) participate in an interview session where I will ask open-ended questions related to your experiences using performance assessments in your classroom; (3) participate in a focus group discussion regarding this same topic; and (4) submit personal journal responses that will allow you to reflect on your experience. I will audio record all interviews and focus group discussions for transcription purposes. It should take approximately 2 hours for you to complete the procedures listed. Your name and other identifying information will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

The screening survey can be found attached to this recruitment letter and can be emailed to me at [REDACTED].

If you have questions, you are encouraged to contact me at: [REDACTED] or by email at [REDACTED]. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Susan Mahlburg

Doctoral Student, Liberty University

**APPENDIX C: Screening Survey**

1. Are you currently teaching, or have you taught in the past two years, an English class at the high school level?
2. If yes to Question 1, did this class consist of a heterogenous mix of student ability levels?
3. If yes to Question 2, did this class utilize performance assessments in lieu of, or in addition to, more traditional assessment measures (i.e., standardized tests such as multiple-choice quizzes)?
4. If yes to Question 3, were you the educator who evaluated the student assessments?
5. Are you willing to participate in this study?
6. If yes to Question 5, please provide your contact information and best times for an individual interview.
7. Are you also willing to participate in a small focus group interview and complete reflective writing prompts as part of this study?
8. Please provide the best email address to contact you about this study.
9. If necessary, may I call or text you? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_, If yes, please provide the phone number you would like me to use.

#### **APPENDIX D: Thank You Email for Screening Survey Participants**

I am inviting you to participate in a research study regarding teachers' perception of performance assessments in secondary English classes. Your participation in this research would be much appreciated; please consider participating. Please see the informed consent document for information about the study, consent, and confidentiality. This is contained as an attachment within this email.

Thank you in advance for participating in this study. Your input is critical to learning more about teacher perceptions of performance assessments.

#### **Thank You Email for Those Not Selected to Participate**

Thank you for submitting a screening survey. Based upon one or more of your screening survey responses, you have not been selected as a study participant. The time you took to complete the survey is greatly appreciated.



## APPENDIX E: Consent Form for Selected Participants

The Liberty University Institutional  
Review Board has approved  
this document for use from  
2/13/2020 to --  
Protocol # 4203.021320

### Consent Form

A Phenomenological Study of Performance Assessments  
in Detracked Secondary English Classes  
Susan Mahlburg  
Liberty University  
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study comparing teachers' perceptions of the use of performance assessments in high school English classes. You were selected as a possible participant because you are an English teacher who has taught detracked classes at the secondary level within the past two years. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Susan Mahlburg, a student in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to understand how teachers describe the experience of using performance assessments in detracked English classrooms.

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in an individual interview. This should take about 1 hour.
2. Participate in a 1-hour focus group discussion
3. Respond to two 15-minute writing prompts
4. Review a transcript of your individual interview and your part in the focus group discussion for accuracy. This should take about 15 minutes to complete.

**Risks of Participation:** The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

**Benefits of Participation:** Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit for taking part in this study. However, you may benefit from participating in the collaborative conversation with other high school English teachers during a focus group discussion.

Benefits to society include understanding teachers' perceptions of using performance assessments in secondary English classrooms, improving professional development around this topic for teachers, and improving academic outcomes for students in related detracked secondary English classrooms.

**Compensation:** Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant.

The Liberty University Institutional  
Review Board has approved  
this document for use from  
2/13/2020 to --  
Protocol # 4203.021320

Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data will be stored on a password locked computer. After three years, all electronic data will be deleted. Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. The data will be maintained on a USB flash drive secured in a locked box at the researcher's home and destroyed four years after completion of the study. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings. I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:** If you choose to withdraw from the study, please inform the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in the study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study should you choose to withdraw.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Susan Mahlburg. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at s[REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Gail Collins, at [REDACTED].

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. My signature below constitutes consent to participate in this study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

**Signature of Participant:** \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX F: Interview Questions

### Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions:

1. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me. Please share your history as a teacher.  
How did you decide to become a teacher? How long have you been teaching?
2. What courses do you currently teach, and how would you describe the range of student readiness and ability in these courses?
3. Please describe your experience teaching English at this school.
4. Please talk about how you designed today's lesson.
5. What is your overall philosophy and approach to curriculum and instruction design?
6. Under what conditions do you believe the strongest learning outcomes are achieved?
7. What do you view as your purpose as a teacher?
8. Please describe how the nature of your classroom, namely being detracked and using performance assessments, affects your instruction, curriculum, and expectations?
9. What do you perceive as the purpose of detracking? Of differentiation? Of performance assessments?
10. If your experiences with and perceptions of detracking and performance assessments have changed, how so?
11. Please describe any differences in grading for students based on ability or classification, such as honors or non-honors, in your classes.
12. Describe any perceived tradeoffs in detracking, especially the learning of students of below-average, average, or above-average ability versus in tracked classes.
13. Please describe the amount of professional development and support provided by the school specifically for detracking or differentiation.

14. Describe your feeling of preparation for the task of achieving meaningful differentiation.
15. How would you describe the school's systems for the support of detracking?
16. Please describe how and for what purposes you use performance assessments in your classroom.
17. What advantages and disadvantages, if any, do you perceive for detracking and performance assessments in secondary English classrooms?

## APPENDIX G: Focus Group Questions

### Focus Group Questions:

1. Please tell me how long each of you have been working with the other teachers in this group and/or department.
2. Please describe how you collaborate with one another.
3. Please discuss the history of detracking as you have experienced it at your school.
4. Please discuss the history of performance assessment usage at your school.
5. What motivated the adoption of detracking and performance assessments at your school?
6. What challenges or benefits have detracking, performance assessments, and their combination brought to you as an English teacher?
7. In what ways have detracking or performance assessments impacted your collaboration among teachers?
8. How would you describe as the purpose of detracking and differentiation?
9. To what extent do these goals align with your goals as a department?
10. To what extent do you believe these goals are achieved?
11. In what ways has the school administration supported detracking and differentiation?

## APPENDIX H: Writing Prompt Questions

Writing Prompt Questions: Please spend 15 minutes reflecting upon the following questions.

Support your response by considering specific anecdotal occurrences.

1. The psychological theory of constructivism suggests that the highest quality, longest-lasting learning results from the activity and self-organization resulting from learners' attempts to create context and meaning for new information. To what extent have you found performance assessments or detracking to support this kind of learning? To what extent do you find these contentions about learning to be true and why?
2. What administrative support have you received for implementing detracking? Which aspects of this support have been most/least helpful? What additional support would you like to receive?

**APPENDIX I: Excerpts from Researcher’s Reflexive Journal**

Date	Entry
June 26, 2019	<p>As a teacher of detracked high school English classes, I inevitably have biases and previous experience with detracking, differentiation, and performance assessments in both philosophy and practice. In theory, detracking benefits students who would otherwise not have equitable access to a rigorous curriculum. However, my experience has been that the heterogenous makeup of a classroom means little if not skillfully paired with differentiation techniques to ensure that all students are being both challenged and supported as they encounter learning experiences. I have found that performance assessments can certainly provide insight into critical thinking skills that are harder to assess via more traditional or standardized means.</p>
Feb 20, 2020	<p>In conducting my pilot study, one participant commented on the potential “loading” of the word “meaningful” in Question 14 of the Individual Interview Questions. I’m reflecting on this, but I think the construction of the question is pertinent and crucial in discerning differentiation as it relates to the confluence of these ideas, versus as a strategy that is either not employed purposeful or lacks substance within the constructed learning space. I am interested in whether this will elicit similar pause among the study participants.</p>

March 3, 2020	<p>There is an interesting tension re: collaboration and autonomy.</p> <p>Collaboration is almost being interpreted as calibration or corroboration—this idea that if the standards align, the content remains at the mercy of the individual teacher. I'm picking up on some differences aligned to depth but this is not being acknowledged through the teacher perceptions.</p>
March 6, 2020	<p>This group seemed to be more of a tough-love mix. A lot of the commentary centered on student motivation, student accountability, and how procedural accountability impacted the classroom environment and the way the teachers viewed curriculum and assessment. There's a lot of acknowledgement of teacher-student relationship and its impact on learning, but is that feeling being reciprocated and how is that changing the dynamics with how the teachers are feeling/not feeling support and development?</p>
March 9, 2020	<p>So many of the participants are career-switchers, even those who are younger. Is that influencing the way they are describing procedural concerns at all? I'm also a career-switcher and tend to embrace change more readily ... is this just an influence of how the teaching field has morphed over the last decade? Or is it due to more recent best-practice training? More exposure because of the tendency to seek grad school?</p>



**APPENDIX J: Audit Trail**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>
7/24/19	Application Submitted to Potential Research District
9/27/19	Application Approved by Research District; Permission to Research Letter Acquired
12/6/19	Completion of Proposal Defense
1/8/20	Application Submitted to IRB
2/6/20	IRB Approval Received
2/20/20	Conducted Pilot Study
2/24/20	Screening Survey Sent to Teachers in Research District
2/28/20	Screening Surveys Evaluated / Notifications Sent to Participants
3/2-3/3	Interviews Conducted at Site 1
3/4-3/6	Interviews Conducted at Site 2
3/9/20	Interviews Conducted at Site 3
3/2-3/12	Data Transcription & Coding Completed in NVivo
3/12-3/17	Theme Development Process
3/18/20	Chapter 4 Complete, Sent to Chair for Review
3/25-4/2	Peer Review of Data Collection Procedure Conducted
4/4/20	Chapter 5 Complete, Sent to Chair for Review

### APPENDIX K: Significant Statements

Significant Statement	Formulated Statement
<p>The kids on average, in my room, are anywhere from a fourth grade reading level to, to college, abilities</p> <p>We have to almost individually assess the students</p>	<p>The wide range of abilities in detracked classrooms requires teachers to differentiate, often on an individual basis.</p>
<p>All my standards are the higher level stuff</p> <p>A kid can identify author's tone and author's purpose without fully understanding punctuation and capitalization</p>	<p>Higher level, critical thinking skills are a highly valued outcome in secondary English classrooms; developing these skills should not be blocked by deficits in other areas.</p>
<p>So that's where you have to differentiate like, how am I going to make this smaller? How am I going to chunk this for him, make this a little bit more simple? I want the critical thinking to be there, but I also need to maybe scaffold a little bit for him and front load some information that will be more helpful.</p> <p>Exposure to the bigger context</p>	<p>An effective differentiation technique is to break lessons into smaller component parts that are approachable for all students but still form part of a broader, more complex whole.</p>
<p>With high expectations comes high performance</p> <p>I mean security, feeling secure in who they are, and knowing that they can take risks because they're loved in that classroom, that type of security.</p>	<p>A supportive atmosphere of high expectations is key to success in detracked classrooms.</p>

<p>The reason that kids fail out of our school is not their ability to do the work and frequently it's, it looks like laziness, but it's actually like executive dysfunction like they have no idea how to manage everything that they have to do here</p> <p>It's "How fast can I get this work done and go on and do what I'd rather do?"</p>	<p>Student motivation can be an issue for the entire range of ability and readiness levels in detracked classrooms.</p>
<p>So anything that I present to the kids needs to have some type of cultural or societal relevance.</p> <p>I think student choice really leads, because they get to pick how they want to learn, you know, it's creating from them that they've learned based on that unit</p>	<p>Performance assessments help address student engagement via student choices that increase the relevance of material.</p>
<p>And, I learned that teaching a kid to be able to organize their thoughts and express those thoughts with a specific purpose in mind really works to organize their mind. It really works to, it helps them with that efficacy piece, as well.</p> <p>Think about something that they initially dismissed or sounds really hard, but end up really proud of the product</p>	<p>Performance assessments support higher level thinking outcomes and student efficacy.</p>
<p>I tried to differentiate for them, I tried to scaffold for them, and they kind of shut down, and got really confused and frustrated.</p>	<p>Student attitudes can suffer if differentiation is not successful.</p>

<p>It's extra time on me, but it's also extra time on them that they're taking the time to walk.</p> <p>And yes, I noticed a huge difference.</p>	<p>High quality teaching in detracked classrooms is time-intensive but rewarding.</p>
<p>Frankly what I think they're calling differentiations are just modifications</p>	<p>Differentiation is not always correctly conceived or implemented.</p>
<p>A literacy coach helped us, and like taught us how to break down questions for kids, taught us how to write code or to create activities where kids could figure out context clues, or analyze, or what a comprehension question was, what a knowledge question was, what a synthesis question was.</p>	<p>Specialists are a valuable source of support for differentiation strategies.</p>
<p>I'm very satisfied with what my graduate school had to offer.</p>	<p>Graduate school curriculum on differentiation is viewed as effective.</p>
<p>Professional development is the bane of every teacher's existence of almost all of it. I mean, it seems like a lot of it is either the same stuff repackaged into something new, or it's not very useful.</p>	<p>Existing professional development, especially on detracking and differentiation, is lacking in availability and quality.</p>