



Labeling and the Advanced Placement (AP) Program

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Background

While schools can offer students opportunities, they can also place limitations. The process of academic tracking has played a significant role in the U.S. education system and is implemented in approximately 90 percent of high schools (Vanfossen, Jones, & Spade, 1987). Tracking is the process in which students are divided, grouped and assigned to varying classes based on ability such as high or low or the type of preparation such as academic, vocational, or general (Conn, 2015). Tracking, while intended to facilitate a better learning environment for students, has affected the opportunities accessible to students of varying academic tracks. Past research has shown that students placed and labeled within low academic tracks experience different treatment than those within high academic tracks. An example of tracking can be seen in the manner in which higher performing students are placed within tracks such as Advanced Placement (AP) or honors. The Advanced Placement (AP) program, established in the 1950s, was aimed to provide students with a way to earn college credit and to learn college-level material within high schools in efforts to avoid introductory courses once in college (Klopfenstein and Thomas, 2009).

The process of sorting and grouping students begins with identifying students' intellectual capabilities and accomplishments. These established groups are then labeled and characterized by others such as teachers as a certain type such as high achieving, low achieving, on level, etc., (Oakes, 1985). While there is a pre-existing belief that students learn better or more in groups of similar abilities, such categorization creates a gateway for labeling and stigmatization (Oakes, 1985; Thomson, 2012). The labeling theory proposes that individuals subconsciously perceive how others see or label them, which overtime forms the basis of their self-identity (Conn, 2015). This theory explains that a label ascribed to an individual increases their exhibition of characteristics associated with the label (Gates, 2010).



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Purpose of Study

The purpose of the study is to gain more information regarding the varying experiences students encounter when in AP or non-AP tracks as well as to provide more information on the implications of labeling on students.

Research Questions

Using the labeling theory framework, this research will examine how labeling students as AP or non-AP affect their academic success, academic self-efficacy, and the school's academic culture.

Methods

This research uses primarily qualitative methods. There were a total of 11 participants, 9 student participants and 2 teacher participants. Student participants are 18 years old or older and have graduated from a public high school in the United States. Teacher participants currently teach at a public high school within the U.S. Participants recruited were interviewed via Zoom and asked about their teacher-student interactions, class instruction, expectations, the implication of their AP or non-AP label as well as the school's academic culture. In addition, student participants completed a questionnaire via Qualtrics that asked about their age, race/ethnicity, educational plans, and the number of Advanced Placement (AP) courses taken throughout high school. Data collected from the interviews and questionnaires is currently being analyzed using Dedoose software.

Common Themes Observed

- Class rigor and expectations:

Student participants mentioned how demanding their classes were and gave examples through discussing some of the assignments they were given. It was often mentioned by student participants that AP classes required more effort and assignments given tended to be more demanding.

"You could definitely get away without reading if you were in a not AP class whereas for my AP classes you had to engage with the textbook."

- Teacher Quality

When discussing teachers assigned to varying courses, most students often mentioned that the quality of teacher was dependent on their teaching experience and preparation (i.e., their schooling). It was frequently mentioned by student participants that teachers would teach both AP and non-AP courses, therefore they didn't perceive a difference between teachers. In addition, some student participants when talking about their favorite teachers, it tended to be a teacher that taught in both tracks.

- Perceived benefits of AP

All participants acknowledged that there were benefits to AP classes/the AP program. Participants mentioned similar benefits such as it helped with college admissions, can earn college credit, can help prepare students for college though helping students develop their time management and critical thinking skills.

- Perception of AP/non-AP students

All participants were able to speak on characteristics commonly associated with AP/non-AP students that aligned with one another's responses. AP students were generally assigned more positive characteristics such as smart, self-motivated, driven, hardworking, studious, college-bound, etc. Non-AP students were associated with less positive characteristics such as an average student, not as ambitious, need more encouragement, interested in other things (i.e., sports), lazy, etc.

- Expectations for Ap/non-AP students

Most of the student participants mentioned that expectations for AP students were often higher than those held for non-AP students. Some of the expectations mentioned were of those held by teachers, school administrators and by their peers. Such expectations included who they were expected to socialize with and how they are expected to academically perform.

- Impact of label

Student participants who were in primarily AP classes reported more of an impact because of their label of “AP”. Often mentioned by primarily AP student participants are the academic pressures, social pressures, status, and assumptions made about them because of their “AP” label. However, some student participants who were in non-AP classes mentioned feeling that they have to prove themselves especially in classes where AP students are present.

"I gotta study harder so I can like keep up... so I did feel I had to work a little harder because I was in a smarter class I guess."

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