Social Identity of School Superintendents and their Attitudes and Perceptions on the Structure of Educational Tracking in Public Education

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Abstract

Tracking or ability grouping is an educational policy and practice that impacts educational access and outcomes for students. Although the practice of tracking is evidenced in schools, these policies and practices have negative economic, political and social impacts on student outcomes. School based policies and practices may serve to widen achievement gaps and limit educational access and opportunities for some groups of students. The attitudes, beliefs and social identity of a school superintendent may affect how the leader makes decisions on the implementation of policies and practices with respect to tracking and ability grouping. This study seeks to understand how the social identity and beliefs of educational leaders, specifically the superintendent of schools, may affect decision making that maintains the practice of tracking in secondary public education. To understand the technical, normative and political dimension of tracking it must be examined through a theoretical lens. Based on the research problem and the impact on student outcomes learning theory and social reproduction theory were used as the foundation for this study. The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how the social identity and beliefs of educational leaders, specifically the superintendent of schools may influence decision making that maintains the practice of tracking in secondary public educational programs. This narrative study explored the social identity of superintendents and their attitudes and beliefs about intelligence and the influence of their social identity and beliefs about learning on educational decision making.

Keywords: tracking, intelligence, beliefs, social identity, mindset
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Statement of Problem

“Now the Star-Belly Sneetches had bellies with stars. The Plain-Belly Sneetches had
none upon thars. Those stars weren’t so big. They were really small, you might think
such a thing wouldn’t matter at all. But because they had stars, all the Star-Belly
Sneetches would brag, ‘We’re the best kind of Sneetch on the beaches.’”

— The Star-Belly Sneetches by Dr. Seuss

This excerpt from a children’s story tells the tale of how arbitrary qualities and
characteristics inform social identity and influence outcomes and opportunities for a population
of Star-Belly Sneetches. For example, the Star-Belly Sneetches were viewed to be more
desirable and they were selective in who they admitted to their games. They had perceived
advantages as they had stars and the other Sneetches did not. As commentary on a philosophy
evidenced in culture and society, specifically in public education, it serves as an example of the
practices that exist in public education.

One of the purposes of public education is, it is one mechanism aimed at mitigating the
effects of social inequity. In public education all students should have the opportunity and
access to quality educational programs that promote achievement. Despite principled intentions,
many educators and educational programs continue to sort and stratify students into hierarchical
structures that may perpetuate systemic inequity with respect to access to educational programs.
While sorting students by ability may appear to be objective, these decisions are, in fact, often
subjective and may negatively impact access and outcomes for students.

Tracking or ability grouping is the process of assigning and sorting students to
homogenous, instructional groups based on ability. Tracking restricts student access to some
school programs, may impact outcomes for students in accessing rigorous higher education programs, and may influence the types of careers available to them. Proponents of tracking state that ability grouping enhances learning through targeted instruction, which results in course content individualized to students’ ability level (Slavin, 1987, 1990; Mickelson, 2005). Opponents of ability grouping policies take the position that ability grouping practices widen achievement gaps and limit educational access (Rees, Arygs, & Brewer, 1996; Hanushek & Woesmann, 2005; Oakes, 2005). Educational policies that track students by ability have been reported to restrict access to enriched educational programs and deprive students of significant opportunities (Oakes, 1985, 1990, 1997; Gamoran, 1986, 1987; Welner, 2000).

Implementation of educational reform aimed at heterogeneous grouping in secondary education may result in long term economic benefit for students and society (Ansalone, 2004; Hallinan, 2004; Oakes, 2005; Biafora & Ansalone, 2008). These theories of grouping are based on an assumption that closing the gap between students’ ability and instructional content will optimize student achievement. As educators contend with the pressure to increase academic rigor with the implementation of a nationalized set of standards (CORE curriculum), the focus on equal access to rigorous content has created a national agenda and debate on education. In light of increasing pressure to hold all students to high learning standards, policy decisions such as tracking have taken on increased importance (Welner, 2001). The influence of tracking on student achievement was cited at the 2005 Governor’s National Education Summit on High Schools. Their concluding report, entitled “An Action Agenda for Improving America’s High Schools,” states the following: “American high schools typically track some students into a rigorous college-preparatory program, others into vocational programs with less-rigorous curriculum and still others into a general track. Today, all students need to learn the rigorous
content usually reserved for college-bound students, particularly in math and English” (Conklin & Curran, 2005, p. 11).

State and local educational standards such as those outlined by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) reflect research-based educational practices that emphasize that secondary instructional programs should recognize and celebrate student diversity through a commitment to heterogeneous grouping. However, some grouping practices in districts appear to be in conflict with these standards. As educational policy and decision makers, school superintendents influence program and practices. Spillane and Thompson (1997) completed a comprehensive study that found that local educational authorities play an indelible role and affect the implementation of educational policies at the local level. Superintendents, by nature of their role, are in a position to reinforce or change policies and practice that impact access and opportunities for students. The beliefs, perception, and agency of the superintendent may inform this decision making with respect to tracking as a strategy for educational organization in a school district.

**Research Topic**

This research examines the social identity of school superintendents and their attitudes and perceptions on the structure of educational tracking in public schools. This narrative study explores the patterns that emerge in participants’ interviews in order to understand how life experiences and their social identity may influence their beliefs and perceptions. Framing participants’ experiences and stories may reveal a deeper understanding of how their perceptions may inform decision making within their public school district.

**Research Problem**

Educators are perhaps the most influential individuals in a person’s life (Konold et al.,
The attitudes and perceptions of educators can shape educational policies and programs that impact students. Educational administrators, such as superintendents, influence the policies and practices implemented in schools. Tracking, or ability grouping, is an educational policy and practice that impacts educational access and outcomes for students. The policy and practice of tracking stratifies students based on purported interests or abilities (Gamoran, 2009). Advocates of tracking believe it affords the opportunity to individualize education and enables students to learn at their own pace (Marsh, 1987). Ansalone (2000) noted that tracking gives educators a chance to modify instruction to meet the needs of the individual. Kulik and Kulik (1982) found that students with varied academic abilities benefitted when instruction was directed at academic levels that aligned with ability.

Although the practice of tracking is evidenced in schools, these policies and practices may have negative economic, political and social impacts on student outcomes. School based policies and practices may serve to widen achievement gaps and limit educational access and opportunities (Oakes, 1990). As an organizational structure, tracking in schools serves to sustain programs that reinforce low expectations for students who are disproportionately from minority groups, a low socioeconomic status, or who may have disabilities (Oakes and Saunders, 2008). Tracking perpetuates the culture of inequality and poverty: Disadvantaged students are more often represented in lower tracks, where they access a less rigorous curriculum with less qualified teachers—thereby limiting their access to higher education, as well as better paying jobs (Ansalone, 2004).

The racial and socioeconomic stratification that is a consequence of tracking practices may be considered justifiable, if student outcomes such as higher achievement were evidenced. However, the research often reflects a gap between theory and reality. Huebert and Hauser
(1999) and Oakes (2005) illustrate that lower track programs consistently elicit data that reflects low student achievement outcomes. Furthermore, the skills gap between students placed in higher tracks and lower tracks widens significantly over time (Gamoran & Mare, 1989). The negative outcomes for some populations of students seem to necessitate a systemic change in philosophy and practice. It is suggested that this change will be effective if it is propelled by the leadership within each district.

The attitudes and beliefs of a school superintendent may affect how a leader makes decisions on the implementation of policies and practice with respect to tracking and ability grouping. The beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions, which also inform the social identity of school leaders, may offer insight into how identity informs educational decision making. A narrative may emerge from their life experiences and stories that will elucidate themes and inform initiatives that will positively impact students and result in policy changes within a district.

The purpose of this study is to understand how the social identity and beliefs of educational leaders, specifically the superintendent of schools, may affect decision making to maintain the practice of tracking in public educational programs. This narrative study explores the relationship of the social identity of superintendents and their attitudes and beliefs about intelligence, as well as their influence on educational decision making.

**Justification for Research**

School based policies may serve to widen achievement gaps and limit educational access for students (Oakes, 1990). Research shows that the process of sorting and classifying students is less about educational outcomes and more concerned with sorting students to fill functional roles in society (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Oakes, 1985). Existing research on the practice of tracking has examined the underlying belief systems of students, teachers, parents and school
principals (Biafora & Ansalone, 2010, 2008, 2004). From the perspective of all stakeholders, the data reveal the negative impact of tracking on student access and opportunities.

**Deficiencies in Research**

A review of the literature reveals that the stakeholder group that has not been sufficiently represented is school superintendents. This research expands on existing research and solicits data on the role of the superintendent and how, as a stakeholder group, superintendents may be instruments to alter educational practice locally, at the state level, and nationally. Seeking to understand how the beliefs, attitudes, and social identity of the school superintendent influences decision and policy making may offer insights into educational leaders as they govern educational outcomes for students.

As superintendents routinely establish policies and practices that are intended to be equitable to all students, a reflection on how policies and practices may be implemented is indicated. The literature is replete with data confirming that educational policies and practices that reinforce tracking limit access to rigorous academic programs. Access to demanding educational programs is inconsistent and inequitable in schools where students are classified and sorted. This research gathers insights and reflections to enable educators to examine practices within the context of the impact of decision making on student outcomes. It may enable other stakeholders within the educational community to embrace a deeper understanding of how decision making influences student outcomes with respect to tracking practices.

**Audience**

Inequities due to the practice of tracking limit access and opportunity to enroll in rigorous courses of study and limit access to highly qualified teachers and more competitive higher education programs (Welner, 2001). By using two theoretical frameworks, learning theory and
social reproduction theory, scholars and practitioners have an opportunity to gain deeper insights on how decision making about tracking practices are grounded in theory. An understanding of how individuals perceive themselves and develop beliefs and attitudes is essential to understanding and changing this paradigm of school organization. As superintendents seek to understand their motivations as unpacked through this narrative journey, there is a hope for change, with respect to meeting the needs of students.

Research on the beliefs and social identity of school superintendents and how these attributes inform decision making will expand upon current research and solicit insights from another group of stakeholders—i.e. school superintendents. This group has been underrepresented in research that seeks to examine the impact of decision making on equitable opportunities and outcomes for students. As policy makers for a school district, these individuals wield influence and impact educational programming. By seeking to understand what influences the development of their beliefs and perceptions, this research may offer insights that will expand the field of research. This research seeks to fill a gap in existing literature, and the results may be generalized to support school committees as they engage in decision making, when they are hiring superintendents. A deeper examination of the beliefs of educational leaders and the influence on policy making may generate dialogue about school based practices and may propel change within the community. Further research in this field may challenge educational leaders to collaborate to alter state and local educational guidelines and practices that may serve to limit outcomes for students.

**Significance of the Research Problem**

Tracking in education, sometimes also termed ability grouping, involves the clustering of the entire student population into different groups or courses, based on students’ needs, ability,
and/or accomplishments. According to this method of student classification, students undergo several assessment methods that measure their Intelligence Quotient (IQ), abilities, skills and aptitudes. Students are often labeled as below average, average, or above average, and this will then determine into which classes students will enroll and with which classmates he/she will study (Kern & Hunter, 2004). While tracking is viewed by some to be ingenious and effective, it is actually a controversial issue that may lead to discrimination, biases and an unequal allocation of resources. As a result of these consequences, educators have varying views with respect to tracking practices.

The debate on the ethicality and effectiveness of tracking is centered on the fact that tracking or ability grouping has economic, political and social impacts on student outcomes. Supporters of tracking claim that the grouping of students according to their ability provides a means of leveling the “playing field” by guaranteeing that students at equivalent levels in their capabilities and skills will advance with peers with similar abilities. Slavin (1987) also added that grouping students according to their abilities provides a solution to the varied demands of classes containing students with mixed abilities by making instruction easier: students who learn at the same pace and/or capacity are grouped together. Similarly, Ansalone (2000) noted that tracking gives the instructor a greater chance to modify his or her teaching techniques to be able to cater to the specific needs of the students—if they were at equal levels.

In addition, advocates of tracking believe that it is among the best means of individualizing education, wherein information is provided to the student according to his/her own pace—especially for lower-level students who can gain more opportunities for individual attention from the teacher (Marsh, 1987). In a meta-analysis conducted by Kulik and Kulik (1982), the authors found that both low-level and high-level students benefitted from a form of
learning that was molded to their level. By determining students’ learning abilities or achievements, teachers can provide instruction at a pace that decreases the pressure on the child, thereby guaranteeing that learning becomes really enjoyable. Additionally, authors also stated that tracking supports the self-esteem of students placed in both high and low levels of grouping. One research study offered that some students received boosts in their self-esteem after being provided with multiple opportunities to excel because they were tracked in a level at which they can be most productive (Mulkey, Catsambis, Steelman, & Crain, 2005).

Tracking proponents advocate the philosophy of “one size does not fit everyone.” Individuals learn at varying speeds and varying degrees, and proponents believe that placing students with students with similar abilities in the same class will yield positive outcomes for all students. In further support of tracking rather than heterogeneous grouping, there are data that show that placing a struggling student in a heterogeneous class, where he/she is constantly reminded of his/her inadequacies may lead to negative effects. Citing these data, supporters of tracking purport that placement in heterogeneous environments may result in a student’s loss of interest in learning, leading to either an increase in drop-out rates or a decrease in a school’s performance ratings. For many students, a heterogeneous learning environment is their reality, wherein the classroom standards expect lower-level students to work at the same pace as their higher-level peers and achieve at levels that should not be demanded of them at their current learning level. Hallinan (1994) offered that the effective implementation of tracking should be driven by the rigor and pacing of curriculum and the need for educational objectives that are aligned with the individual needs of the students.

Despite the perceived benefits of tracking, educators and researchers dispute the effectiveness of tracking in supporting students in the effort to effectively realize their academic
and social potential. A salient argument used against ability tracking is that it facilitates educational discrimination, depriving lower-level students of the best quality of education possible because it only awards higher-level students. Oakes (1985) noted that tracking is the propaganda vehicle by which schools or universities nurture inequality among their students. Oakes (1990) found that, due to tracking, inequalities in education have emerged—especially in terms of access to opportunities within the classroom, exposure to competent and qualified educators, and entry into advanced mathematics programs. Data provide compelling evidence that students belonging to lower groups or those ranked with average or below-average abilities have been provided with substandard educational services or deprived of the opportunities available to higher-level students (Welner, 2001).

Oakes (1990) revealed that students belonging to the lowest groups in elementary school had fewer opportunities and options as they selected high school subjects and courses. This same study also found that, in contrast, high-level students were offered a wide variety of advanced and standard courses, as part of their high school education. As a consequence, lower-track students were systemically denied the right to quality, higher-level subjects, such as advanced mathematics courses making it difficult for them to fully develop academically. Wheelock (2005) suggested that most high schools assign their lowest-ranking or least qualified instructors to handle classes containing a majority of lower-level students.

Additionally, lower-track students have been found to be subjected to discrimination in the content of their courses, whereas advanced content and instructor skills are afforded to higher-level students. Although this strategy may be perceived as supporting students by reducing academic pressures, it also limits students’ access and opportunity to improve and compete with students above their level or track. Ekstrom and Villegas (1991) found that, when
compared to higher-level students, lower-track learners were given less stimulating and less exciting curriculum. They were also allowed less frequent productive communications with a teacher. Ekstrom and Villegas (1991) concur with an earlier study by Leder (1987), which found that students belonging to lower tracks were asked fewer process-oriented questions of assessments and provided with less instructional time with the teacher.

Research is replete with evidence that tracking has negative effects for students. In reality, these practices often widen the achievement gap between higher and lower level students. Segregating and sorting students according to their abilities affords greater opportunities to learners in advanced tracks, and more is expected from these students. As a result, advanced learners are able to enhance and improve themselves, while students with perceived lesser abilities are deprived of these opportunities. This practice also deprives lower-level students of the necessary facilities and materials for advanced learning (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). Scherer (1993) even added that, in addition to harming lower-track students, tracking also actually damages higher-ability students by depriving the latter of opportunities to learn the values of cooperation and selflessness in a more diverse class composition.

As a result of tracking, the gap between higher-level and lower-lever students has increased, particularly since resources have been diverted to advanced students, who were found to predominantly belong to middle and upper class families. Gamoran and Berends (1987) found that even after socioeconomic status, ability level, and other similar variables were controlled, achievement differences were exclusively attributable to tracking. A possible explanation for the steady widening of the achievement gap was provided by Welner and Mickelson (2000), who discovered that children belonging to lower tracks were exposed to more rote learning, reduced or substandard educational resources, and a climate of lower academic expectations that did not
require them to excel.

As a remedy, Burris, Welner, and Bezoza (2009) recommended “detracking,” or the removal of the “unequal” practice of classifying students. Assigning students to a heterogeneous classroom will expose students to more opportunities for learning, improvement, and socialization through camaraderie and collaborative learning opportunities. Burris, Welner, and Bezoza (2009) presented three case studies as evidence for the effectiveness of detracking and heterogeneous grouping in reducing the achievement gap between minority students and white learners: In their case studies, educational stratification was successfully mitigated through detracking. Excellent achievement and increased academic student outcomes were promoted. The results concur with earlier studies, which found that detracking offers opportunities for all students to excel in their education (Burris & Welner, 2005; Burris, Wiley, Welner, & Murphy, 2008).

Educators and administrators have varying views when it comes to tracking: These divergent views actually affect the means by which administrators develop educational policies. The attitudes and perceptions of education personnel (teacher or administrators) often inform the practice of tracking as a management tool in public education. Studies by Ansalone and Biafora (2004; 2008; 2010) explored the perceptions of educators in terms of tracking, as well as the effects of these perceptions on tracking. These researchers cited the impact of school personnel attitudes on influencing the maintaining structures of tracking.

In their 2004 study, Ansalone and Biafora analyzed the perceptions and attitudes of elementary school educators towards the structure of tracking. The effect of the data, as measured by beliefs and perceptions, resulted in the continued use of tracking, despite its widely acknowledged negative impact on students. Through a comparison and summary of the personal
reports of 124 elementary teachers, the authors found that one of the greatest reasons that tracking remains pervasive among educational institutions is the difficulties associated with the instruction of larger and more diverse classes. Interestingly, the respondents of the study were aware of the negative effects of tracking on students’ self-concepts, as well as in their opportunities to learn.

Ansalone and Biafora (2008) similarly examined the perceptions of educators that may be promoting the continued use of tracking. However, this study focused on the perceptions of school principals, rather than elementary teachers. This research documented the attitudes and perceptions of 272 private and public school principals in suburban schools in New York. The study aimed toward a more exploratory understanding of the attitudes of principals when it comes to tracking and involved a comparative analysis to determine why the use of tracking within schools continued to thrive, despite 25 years of research negating its effectiveness. The authors found that most of the principals were aware of the literature regarding tracking, most of which presented the negative effects on students. Although the majority of the principals reported being tracked themselves and experiencing positive benefits from the practice, they acknowledged the negative effects of tracking, such as lowered achievement expectations among teachers for lower-strata students. The study found that 56.5% of the respondents did not support the practice of tracking, and 65.5% of principals actually agreed that tracking promotes inequalities. The researchers also found that, while tracking benefits fast learners, it is actually counter-productive for slow learners because they are deprived of opportunities to compete and have access to advanced curricula. Ansalone and Biafora (2008) found that principals assigned to schools defined by higher socioeconomic levels tended to view tracking in a more negative light, compared to principals working in lower socio-economic areas, who were more tolerant of
tracking within schools.

As a group superintendents derive their social identity and meaning as defined by the perceptions of others i.e. stakeholders. Hogg (2001) offers that the social identity of the leader and their relationships with subordinate stakeholders formulates the foundation of effective leadership. With respect to the implementation of policy the role of the leader necessitates a focus on the transactions between leaders and stakeholders such as parents, teachers and principals. The superintendent plays a role in helping stakeholders achieve goals and in the delivery of the educational program. Effective leadership requires the superintendent to influence and mobilize others to achieve collective goals and outputs. As stated by Hogg (2001), “Leaders are people who have a disproportionate influence, through the possession of consensual prestige or the exercise of power, or both over the attitudes, behaviors and destiny of group members” (p.188). While social identity is informed by life experiences, how it propels leaders to affect change varies within the dynamic of the leader’s organization. As leadership is a group process, the relationship between the leader and the organization, in this case an educational environment, is influenced by the social identity of the leader. Hogg (2001) relates that the role and function of the leader as an impetus for change relies on an interrelated set of mutual dependencies. Regardless of how much power is assigned via a role i.e. superintendent in a school district, all stakeholders are dependent on each other to achieve desired mutual outcomes. Parents, teachers, administrators and the superintendent all have a stake in the policies and practices evident in schools. If change is to be affected the superintendent needs to acquire and use political and social capital to effectively influence all stakeholder groups. An understanding of the leaders social identity and how they acquired the values and beliefs they apply in decision making may enable them to more fully appreciate the perspectives of
stakeholders and to understand how their own identity influences their behavior and decision making.

The research on this topic is important: the studies demonstrate that the social identity, attitudes and beliefs of individuals have an influence on decision making involving tracking practices. With this body of available research as a foundation, this research sought to increase the data available so that educational decision making may positively impact students and increase achievement outcomes among all students.

**Research Questions**

This study seeks to understand how school superintendents describe their beliefs about intelligence and how those beliefs impact decision making on the policies/practices of tracking. It asks: How do superintendents describe the evolution of their social identities and the impact of their social identities on the policy of tracking?

**Theoretical Frameworks**

Miles and Huberman (1994) stated that theory plays a critical role in qualitative research. They suggested that the conceptual framework evolves from the theories and experiences an investigator brings to the development of a research project. In order to understand the technical, normative and political dimensions of tracking, these phenomena must be examined through a theoretical lens. Based on the research problem and tracking’s impact on student outcomes, learning theory and social reproduction theory were employed as the foundational theories for this project.

**Learning Theory**

Learning theory may be considered an appropriate theoretical framework for seeking to collect data on this research problem. Learning theory aligned with this research because it
suggests that the beliefs and attitudes of the superintendent may influence policy and decision making, specifically about the practice of tracking. It is imperative to examine the key concepts or themes that are involved in the development of beliefs or values. Examples are the factors that shape the evolution of the superintendents’ views on learning and intelligence. In relation to these factors involving the perception of intelligence, a significant question that was examined is: Is intelligence fixed or malleable?

Different theories have attempted to answer this question, particularly from the perspectives of educators. In general, researchers have proclaimed two views on intelligence: one posits that intelligence is fixed, while the other describes intelligence as something that is malleable and evolves through development. The first view of intelligence is most commonly observed in studies employing entity theory. Entity theory proposes that intelligence is viewed as a fixed, unchangeable entity, wherein a person is viewed as having a quantified amount of fixed intelligence (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002). Dweck (1999) described entity theory as the idea that intelligence is something that is stable and static. Students or learners with such a view of intelligence develop a great desire to prove themselves by appearing smart and avoiding situations that make them appear less intellectually capable.

By ascribing to this view of intelligence, students are more prone to the concept of learned helplessness, a term that refers to a person’s lack of perseverance due to the erroneous premise that any effort toward success will be rendered futile because they have no control over the outcomes (Dweck, 1999). In relation to this concept, individuals with an entity view of intelligence actually are most prone to the negative impact of self-fulfilling prophecies. Self-fulfilling prophecies refer to the individual’s erroneous perception that outcomes are predetermined, usually with negative outcomes. Moreover, it begins with the invalid
interpretation of a situation or prophecy, which then evokes a different behavior, thus enabling the original incorrect idea to actually become realized (Dweck, 1999). The entity theory of intelligence has as its cornerstone the self-fulfilling prophecy. This plays a pivotal role in individual outcomes: The individual develops the belief system that, if intelligence cannot be changed or improved, then the learner is trapped in a situation of low expectations wherein only one method of learning is effective and outcomes are defined solely by intellectual ability. Individuals cease to exhibit effort, because they believe that the outcomes will be negative.

In contrast to the entity view of intelligence, incremental theory supports the argument that intelligence is not a fixed commodity and can be measured in a variety of ways. Dweck (1999) proposed that intelligence is viewed as something that develops and expands through development and experiences. Bandura (1986) proposed that individuals have an infinite capacity for determining and improving their self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to a person’s awareness and confidence in his/her ability to achieve new learning or accomplish an activity or task at an unlimited level of performance. Bandura (1997) added that intelligence can be affected by the individual’s environment, rather than by heredity. The belief in one’s capability to improve is dependent on the positive interconnection of personal behaviors, beliefs and thoughts and the situations presented within the environment. An individual’s beliefs and awareness that intelligence can be developed is among the primary driving forces of the self-efficacy that makes holistic and intellectual growth possible.

In relation to these views on intelligence, it is imperative to recognize that individuals’ beliefs and moral structures are among the most important foundations for attitudes and behaviors. A solid example of this claim is presented by the labeling theory developed by Becker in 1963 (as cited in Phelan & Link, 1999; Link & Phelan, 2014). Originally developed to
explain antisocial and criminal behavior, labeling theory suggests that labels or stereotypes imposed on individuals may influence behavior. For example, in the case of criminals, the negative stigma associated with them makes it difficult for them to find suitable employment and, thus, leads them to commit similar transgressions. The phenomenon of self-fulfilling prophecy may be evidenced: since the individual has been labeled as antisocial or criminal, he/she has little option but to conform to such a judgment—especially if his/her stigma makes rehabilitation challenging. However, this same theory also concluded that societal labels impact the way an individual is perceived by others. In the example provided above, individuals form beliefs and attitudes that impact the way they interact toward individuals by using labels.

In the field of education, these very same principles of labeling theory are evidenced. When an educator maintains a perception that a student is academically talented, expectations tend to be higher and instruction may be more rigorous. However, when a student is viewed as less intelligent, a teacher may hold less rigorous expectations and fail to motivate the child. The labeling or classification of students by educators impacts teachers’ expectations for their students. Students placed in higher tracks are expected to perform better than students in lower tracks. Furthermore, if educators’ beliefs and attitudes persist, then their expectations are often imprinted and operationalized in their behaviors, as well as in their educational policies. The practice of tracking reflects the impact of educator expectations on students grouped according to their abilities: they are held to different expectations. As a result, the academic and social outcomes, with respect to achievement, are inconsistent and vary. Thus, they limit options and opportunities.

The varied and wide ranging expectations and attitudes of teachers may be transformed into actual behaviors. It has been well established that the educator’s behavior has a significant
effect on student outcomes. In a 1970 study, Rist noted that educators unknowingly ranked their students according to class distinction, and these rankings impacted how they treated students. Rist (1970) analyzed several patterns in teacher perceptions and behaviors, evidenced within the delivery of instruction to students. By the second week of students’ kindergarten year, Rist noted a pattern wherein educators unknowingly grouped children into classifications that actually dictated the level of education the students received in their later years of life. The stratification, although seemingly based on the students’ learning abilities, actually had no scientific basis. Students were not formally assessed, nor were any data collected on their academic performance. The classifications were based on teachers’ perceptions. Rist (1970) noted that educators favored students who spoke a dialect that was closer to the norm and who were dressed in newer or cleaner clothing. Such favored students later emerged as members of the highest classification of learners, and students in the higher strata were actually bound by a common characteristic of membership within the higher socioeconomic classes of society. Unfortunately, Rist (1970) also found that the greatest attention and time for learning was given to students belonging to the highest group within the three-group ranking. When the teacher directed attention toward the two lower groups, they most often provided censure or direct negative feedback. In contrast, students in the high group were given less negative feedback. Rist (1970) also noted that this hierarchy became the norm, with respect to socialized behavior among the students. The impact was that the students’ treatment of themselves and of each other were each adversely affected.

As with labeling theory and self-fulfilling prophecy, students who were ranked in the lower groups were made to feel less capable and inferior. These self-perceptions resulted in them acting out accordingly. The acting out behaviors of perceived lower group students
manifested in the appearance of negative behaviors in the classroom, including fights and disturbances during classes. Rist (1970) discovered that, due to the special treatment they received, higher group students developed a form of superiority complex that often caused them to belittle and ignore other students belonging to the lower groups. Rist found that students in the higher group verbally and physically mistreated the students in the lower groups. Interestingly, students in the middle and lower groups also mistreated each other; but none of the members of these lower groups attempted to maltreat the students belonging in the higher group.

Rist’s (1970) findings offer evidence that the perceptions and expectations of educators have a very powerful effect on outcomes for students. A study by Aronson and Golden (1962) supported the main premise of Rist’s study: They found that educators are more likely to have a positive effect on the learning outcome of students, if they are perceived as likeable or when they display a sincere and vested interest in student outcomes. Thus, these two studies offer evidence that the behaviors and attitudes of educators impact outcomes for students. The educator’s expectations and perceptions of the student’s social class and abilities affect how students are treated within the classroom—which also affects student outcomes. Superintendents, who may have prior experiences as classroom teachers, may develop belief systems that are grounded in their classroom experiences. In their role as policy makers and supervisors of educational programming, superintendents may impact the practices of tracking and ability grouping within their school districts.

**Social Reproduction Theory**

By examining the beliefs of superintendents and how these beliefs reinforce the practice of tracking, we may develop an understanding of how social identity influences the decisions of educational leaders. If superintendents’ beliefs propel them to espouse beliefs or perceptions
about groups of students, then student outcomes may be impacted by how superintendent beliefs are transformed into policies and practices. How does social identity influence superintendent decision making, especially in terms of policies involving tracking?

In an effort to investigate this phenomenon, the theory of social reproduction is important, because it provides a deeper understanding of how beliefs inform decision making. Social reproduction refers to the process by which a society or group of individuals perpetuate and sustain a specific social tradition or social structure over time (Morrow & Torres, 1995). In terms of education, social reproduction may be evidenced when seeking to identify the possible reasons why tracking continues to be pervasive throughout the United States—even though literature is replete with evidence that it has a negative impact on students. Social reproduction, as a construct for organizing individuals or groups, can serve as the mechanism that impacts outcomes and access to education, jobs, or higher social status. The separation of the individual from the covenant of public education and the structures that reinforce inequality and inequity have been theorized by Dewey (1916), Freire (1974), Giroux (1981), Oakes (1985) and Greene (1998). Social reproduction posits that class structure limits the ability to identify and promote merit (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Educational systems function at a structural level to promote attitudes and values that reinforce tracking as a mechanism to organize and stratify students by ability. Bourdieu (1979) described social reproduction as a set of dispositions that are commonly held by members of a social group, and these subjectively create attitudes, beliefs and practices that bind individuals together so that they can identify with each other. In addition, several other authors have pointed out that the educational structures within the superintendents’ purview may influence the formation of policies that cause student stratification. Bowles and Gintis (1976) noted that policy makers within institutions serve as mediums for social reproduction of
inequality when they promote the continued practice of structures that are conducive for tracking and similar stratification methods. Bowles and Gintis (1976) found that public education institutions within the United States act as “sorting machines” that plant and cultivate inequality among students.

Tracking practices may be perceived as beneficial in most societies. Such a premise has now become fallacious, however, particularly since tracking in the United States has been utilized at a time when educators were attempting to address a need to inculcate and assimilate immigrants whose educational backgrounds and experiences were not consistent with or understood by American society. This historical paradigm has long outlived its philosophical foundation as an economic and social construct to maintain societal boundaries.

In examining the beliefs and attitudes of superintendents through the theoretical framework of social reproduction, it may be inferred that their social, educational, and historical backgrounds may impact their worldviews and perceptions of individuals and roles. Superintendents may be impacted by their perceptions and beliefs regarding tracking—especially if tracking was part of their prior experiences or worldview.

Data presented by Blau and Duncan (1967) suggest that the superintendents’ views on students and their families’ attainment of a status—as well as the influence of their status—can actually also impact decision making and policy-making. These findings support Rist’s (1970) conclusions that students’ socioeconomic class informs teachers’ preferences for specific students. This may also impact students’ academic outcomes. According to Blau and Duncan (1967), social factors, in addition to the quality of education, influence the academic, social, and economic outcomes of students. Although social factors—and particularly social background and parental factors—are considered as weak modifying factors for educational attainment, they
do exert influence. For superintendents, an awareness of students’ social factors may inform their decision to label students or groups of students and propagate stereotypes most commonly associated with certain socioeconomic groups and which stimulate specific positive or negative responses from educators. As reflected in Rist’s (1970) study, higher socio-economic capabilities may impact educators’ decision making, wherein policies are sometimes made to benefit higher-level students more than lower-level students—although such an occurrence may actually be rather subliminally or unconsciously carried out by superintendents.

Several authors have reported that the educational structures within superintendents’ purview may also influence their formation of policies that result in the classification and stratification of students. Bowles and Gintis (1976) noted that superintendents, as policy makers within institutions, serve as mediums for social reproduction of inequality, especially when they promote the continued practice of favoring educational structures that are conducive to tracking and other methods of stratification. Their research also found that public educational institutions within the United States acted as “sorting machines” that planted and cultivate inequality among the students they serve. They posited that some superintendents assume that failures among students are the effect of individual actions, rather than a collective failure of the school in general.

However, this premise ignores the fact that stratification should never be used as a justification for the promotion of injustice or inequality. Students have the right to a quality education, regardless of their purported abilities, social class, or other similar characteristics. Freire (1970) suggested that situations involving oppression should be viewed as “limit situations,” which can serve as focal points for change and transformation. In terms of tracking, the resulting inequalities should be recognized and viewed by superintendents and enable them
to change the structure of schooling. Freire (1970) also proposed that, in contrast to going to the streets and rallying against their oppressors, marginalized members of a society may instead begin the transformation within themselves, and then gradually extend such change to their environment and social institutions. Students marginalized by being assigned to lower tracks can begin change by seeking to advance and not fulfilling the negative self-fulfilling prophecy.

The dispositions of a school leader—specifically the superintendent—may serve as the primary medium for the continued practice of tracking within schools because the superintendents facilitate the educational policies and regulations that continue to promote or negate tracking practices. By examining the foundational beliefs and attitudes of school leaders, the researcher may be able to gain a better understanding of the underlying reasons why tracking remains a prevalent practice within public education. A theoretical framework grounded in social reproduction theory and learning theory will inform an investigation seeking to understand how the beliefs, attitudes and social identity of superintendents may impact the practices of tracking in public education.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

As a foundation for the theoretical framework of this study, the literature review will necessitate the review of seminal works by philosophers and educational reformers. Research was reviewed to unlock the philosophy and social milieu that establishes and fosters the practice of tracking. Exploring the historical context between policy and institutional trends is cited through the work of Tyack and Cuban (1995). As historians of public education, they describe reform trends and the impact on the evolution of educational policies and practices. Their assessment of how intelligence testing and tracking, as a method of social engineering, influenced tracking practices in the schoolhouse during the last hundred years.

The evolution of public education in the United States began in New England with the development of common schools. Public schools could be found in affluent communities in New England and students were taught within the same classroom. Instruction was skills-based and showed little evidence of grouping (Oakes, 1985). These schools, funded through tuition, had enrollments that were homogenous, non-diverse and represented families with economic advantages. By the 1840s, taxpayer funded common schools were prevalent in the Northeast for those with financial means. While Massachusetts implemented compulsory education in 1852, it was not enforced widely, and access to school was limited, often by socioeconomic status: prosperous communities had more funding available, while rural communities had fewer fiscal resources (Brint, 1998). After the Civil War, the influx of immigrants changed the American landscape, and educational reform commenced.

The philosophy and influence of Horace Mann, a proponent of common schools in Massachusetts, served to formulate the foundation for the evolution of free public schools. Mann posited that tax-supported schools with government oversight could and should be available to
the public in a manner that would mitigate the impact of social class, religious affiliation, ethnic
differences, and economic diversity (Messerli, 1972). Messerli (1972) described Mann’s vision
of the common school as a place where individuals would be offered the same opportunities to
learn and achieve, based on their academic talent, rather on the distinction of birth or wealth.
The goal of these common schools was to acclimatize immigrants to American values and
citizenship through socialization and acculturation (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The curriculum
taught in these schools focused on reading, writing, spelling, mathematics, geography and Bible
study. The instructional pedagogy evidenced rote learning, memorization, and recitation with
rigid forms of discipline. This educational construct largely supported working class families in
both rural and urban communities. Elite preparatory schools leading to university entrance were
primarily the purview of the affluent classes. Through tuition based programs, students were
prepared for careers in medicine, law, banking or finance, government, or education. Although
free public education was accessible to much of white society, the two-tiered approach stratified
students according to birth and socioeconomic status. Students of color or minority children had
virtually no access to public education programs.

By the late 1880s, secondary education was transforming, in part because the increase in
immigration required the preparation of a labor force to build the nation’s infrastructure. The
establishment of the public high school was an example of reform intended to bring secondary
education to all, rather than only to the affluent who could afford tuition. These schools were
publically financed and controlled, and they eroded some of the influence of elite academies and
private schools. Such schools were dubbed the “people’s college” (Oakes, 1985).

Beginning in the 1890s, educational reform responded to growing concerns about the
impact of increased immigration and need to systematize educational access to preserve
American culture and values. In 1892, the National Education Association (NEA), led by Charles Eliot, established the Committee of Ten, which was charged with the establishment of a standardized curriculum for secondary education (Oakes, 1985). Additionally the committee was tasked with establishing a college preparatory curriculum and norms for admission to pursue higher education. The proposed secondary curriculum offered four pathways to college, each equally rigorous; the committee was resolute that offering one pathway to college and one general track was not an effective paradigm for secondary education. According to Oakes (1985), the work of this committee was grounded in the philosophy that educational opportunities should be available to all. The purpose of education should be, not only to achieve an occupation or a life role: The Committee believed that education was a means to achieve individual personal enrichment and a love of learning and inquiry.

Between the 1890s and 1920s, the immigrant population was growing by one million annually. Settling in cities amidst squalid conditions and with few employment options, immigrants saw education as the means to a better life. According to Tyack and Cuban (1995), enrollment in public schools expanded by approximately 700% between 1880 and 1918. By 1920, approximately sixty percent of children between the ages of fourteen and seventeen were enrolled in school (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). As noted by Cremin (1964), 58% of students enrolled in public education in 1908 were born to immigrant parents. Given the diverse student population, the challenges of delivering a quality public education were profound. The variety of languages and different cultural norms required individual schools to adjust curriculum and pedagogy to meet students’ minimum educational needs (Cremin, 1964). As communities grew in diversity, the philosophy of what secondary education curricula should encompass changed as well.
Socially, the white majority reacted to the influx of immigrants with trepidation and fear. Fueled by the scientific theory of natural selection proposed by Darwin, white, educated, ruling classes manipulated scientific theory to design a social order founded on the precept that some individuals are more advanced than others. Social Darwinism was a philosophy that postulated that some individuals were naturally selected by birth and breeding to attain and maintain a higher social status. According to the writings of Herbert Spencer (1851), education could do little to alter the social conditions of those who lived in poverty or ignorance. Change in social status would only advance through the process of evolution. This predeterministic philosophy was used to impel a social and political agenda to maintain the status quo for the ruling class within the United States during the early part of the 20th Century. As the educated upper class sought to maintain its power and influence public education began to be used to establish an organizational structure to manage an increasingly diverse American society. Reformers applied the scientific methods of industrialization that were prevalent in business to organize schools into bureaucratic, efficient systems as a strategy to Americanize students (Oakes, 1985). Fueled by agenda driven iconoclasts, widespread public distrust, and a perceived lack of accountability for student outcomes, educational reformers sought to reinvent public high schools.

In 1918, the National Education Association (NEA) developed the *Cardinal Principles of Education*, which became the foundation for secondary curricula for all public high schools. With the inception of this curriculum, the practice of sorting and classifying students had taken root. The NEA report codified the transition from educational imperatives aligned with strictly intellectual goals to a more behaviorally oriented system aligned with the perceived needs of society and students. The *Cardinal Principles* proposed that vocational training, health education, and ethical trading were as important as academic skills. Compulsory education until
the age of eighteen and the creation of junior and senior high school programs were innovations intended to meet the needs of students, provide a skilled work force, and promote responsible citizenship. Pathways allowed students to follow their interests, but within a framework in which intellectual ability was a factor considered when assigning students to academic programs. Historically, evidence of tracking practices may be theoretically grounded by the adoption of the *Cardinal Principles of Education*. These principles set forth policies that established stringent expectations and outcomes for public education. Initially these principles were aimed at keeping diverse populations engaged in education; however, the social and political ramifications were more broadly impactful. According to Tyack and Cuban (1995), “Many educators welcomed the *Cardinal Principles* as an enthusiastic rationale and blueprint for ‘social efficiency,’ the broad socialization of youth to assume a place in the work force. They believed school could and should sort out and prepare students differently for their various destinies in life. This led to the use of intelligence testing and tracking as a form of social engineering” (p. 51).

Tracking, implemented with the intention of increasing efficiency in education, was first developed with the purest of intentions: to meet the diverse learning needs of immigrants entering schools. However, other motives were evidenced, as postulated by Gould (1996): Tracking was established as a mode of limiting the access and participation of minority ethnic groups in all aspects of American society. Integral to tracking was a need to quantify abilities. Theorists developed assessment tools to test students’ abilities, and the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) was offered as the basis for ability grouping. In addition to this new assessment, the concept of “gifted” students was used as a justification for promoting the ranking and classification of students according to their intellect and abilities.

In further support of the precept that tracking was developed to separate students, Losen
(1999) argued that Lewis Terman, who promoted the use of the Stanford-Binet IQ, encouraged the use of tracking within schools to separate certain racial groups from Anglo-Americans in the educational setting. While, as early as the 1930s, no significant benefits had been found to justify the use of tracking, it continued to be part of the organizational structure of schools. The use of intelligence testing to sort and classify students was based on the idea that intelligence was inherited, constant, and related to genes or physical characteristics. This assessment based stratification of students fostered a superiority complex among Caucasians and reinforced the belief that individuals with different skin colors or other physical characteristics had lower IQ’s or learning abilities. According to Dweck (2008), this created a foundation for discrimination, including through tracking.

While the introduction of intelligence testing supported bureaucratic and rigid structures in schools, a movement was also established to engage in a more progressive approach to educating students. Educators who believed that educational experiences should reflect democratic philosophies and values were concerned that the differentiation of educational programs and access to opportunities based on aptitude, capacities, or social heredity served to establish an educational system stratified by merit and influence. Differentiated and tracked curricula evolved, with the intent to meet the needs of students; however, access to programs was limited by achievement or other factors, such as socioeconomic status or race. As the philosophy of selecting pathways for students advanced, it remained inconsistent with a more progressive philosophy of democratic access to education.

Reformers such as Cubberly and Dewey focused their educational reform movement on the education of the whole child. They moved away from strict authoritarian governance to a more broadly expanded curriculum that was less focused on rigid academics and more attuned to
creating a learning environment that emphasized experiential and exploratory learning. Many of their innovations remain part of the core of the United States educational system.

The rapid migration of populations to cities created poor working and living conditions where disease, illiteracy and poverty were rampant. In order to address these problems, leaders tried to apply efficiencies and reforms to not only provide academic instruction, but also to incorporate vocational training and activities of daily living into the school day. The management of schools was transformed to apply the efficiency of running a business into the running of school. As stated by Ravitch (2008), “This latter group of school reformers successfully centralized and bureaucratized school administration and put expert professionals in control of schools while simultaneously limiting the involvement of laypeople and parents” (p. 65).

Leaders of the progressive movement, educator John Dewey (1918), argued, “An undesirable society, in other words, is one which internally and externally sets up barriers to free intercourse and communication of experience. A society which makes provision in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic” (p. 55). Reformers such as Dewey advocated for an educational system that was not based on a meritocracy, but rather, on meeting the needs of the whole child—irrespective of class, race, or socioeconomic status. This philosophy, prevalent in many schools, informs the belief that all children can learn and must be afforded the opportunity to access to a rigorous educational program.

A review of the historical and philosophical context that informed the evolution of educational policy and practice with respect to tracking is essential to understand the mechanisms of social engineering that influenced how schools came to classify, sort and
organize students. The literature shows how intelligence assessment and tracking influenced educational practices that are still prevalent in 21st century high schools.

The philosophies that served as the basis for educational policy evolved and transformed as social and political norms changed, in response to historical events. During the essentialist movement, educational policies propelled the standardization of curriculum, as well as the establishment of common learning themes and subjects, in order to promote a “common culture” among United States students (Sadker & Zittleman, 2008). However, as diversity increased, the progressive movement gained greater support among educators. As historical events and political movements evolved, the focus on education changed proportionally.

*Brown vs. Board of Education* provides an example of the ideological manifestations of beliefs within the context of politics, economics, and culture in education: In this seminal case, thirteen Topeka parents speaking on behalf of their twenty children filed a class action suit against the Topeka, Kansas Board of Education (1954) because the educational system fostered racial segregation—despite its claim to provide equal educational opportunities to all students. The Brown decision overturned a previous ruling (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896), which allowed for the segregation of Black and White students. The court’s decision in 1954 established the legal framework for equality within schools, wherein racial segregation became a violation of the United States Constitution’s 14th Amendment.

While this case formulated the legal foundation for the creation of equality within schools, changes did not readily promote desegregation or more equitable opportunities for students. Many American communities continued to be divided racially. That divide informed the composition of neighborhood schools—not only by race, but also by economic status. The economic gap influenced support for schools and public perception on public education.
As demographics and public expectations changed, education reform became a national priority. Efforts to implement equality relied on decisions from the American courts. Legislation impacting education for women, minorities, the disabled and those whose primary language was not English propelled changes in education (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). As educational opportunism became prevalent, accountability and achievement moved to the center of the political debate on education. In “A Nation at Risk” (1983), a government panel called for a review of academic expectations and demanded changes to public school curricula. Citing mediocre outcomes and low expectations in many schools, this report fostered a back to basics movement and argued for the need for a core curriculum and rigorous course of study for all students. The challenge for local communities was not only how to deliver the program, but also how to finance it. Apple (1976, 1996) has stated that, as schools become more racially diverse, educators must recognize the shift in demographics and respond positively. These changes need to include both an increase in resources and a shift in philosophy focused toward respect for cultural and racial diversity.

As the student population has shifted, the educational establishment has been slow to recognize the need to shift cultural norms within the classroom and school environment. Scholars in politics and the sociology of education have argued that public schools are microcosms of society. Educational opportunity is awarded, based on social class (Anyon, 1980). Anyon (1980) cited the need for the eradication of a system of a hidden curriculum prevalent in many schools. This hidden curriculum is a system of favoritism for affluent middle class and/or White students. Anyon (1980) posits that this system, which has been programmed into United States education, is a hard problem to detect and much harder to eradicate. Anyon (1980) suggested that learning cannot be separated from the context in which children learn,
including the myriad cultural and social constructs that learners experience in their school and home environments.

Nieto (1992) suggested that educators must be made aware that, when they offer differentiated curriculums for varied groups within their schools, they are being inequitable and discriminating against students placed in such programs. Programs aimed at remediating deficits may segregate students and limit access and opportunities to advance. Nieto (2000) posited that by grouping students with similar abilities and calling it differentiation, educators are actually affording students lower quality instruction and limiting their access.

It is important that educators recognize the varied experiences students bring to school when they establish expectations and standards for students. This includes their attitudes, achievements and behavior. Nieto (2000) stated, “Learning emerges from the social, cultural and political spaces in which it takes place and through the interaction and relationships that occur among learners and teachers” (p. 2). This thesis posits that learning cannot be separated from the context in which children learn, including the myriad cultural and social constructs that learners experience in their school and home environments. Nieto continued, “It is especially significant that teachers grasp the influence that social and political context may have on learning because this realization can alter how they perceive their students and consequently what and how they teach them” (p. 11).

Educational reform that impacts public educational programs is shaped by the social, cultural and political influences that reflect societal change. If educational policy makers understand the impact of social and political influences, then instructional programs may offer equitable access and opportunities to all students. Educational programs that implement and advocate student tracking restrict and limit access to rigorous educational programs. As put forth
by Dewey (1918), “Democracy cannot flourish where the chief influences in selecting subject matter of instruction are utilitarian ends narrowly conceived for the masses, and for the higher education of the few, the traditions of a specialized cultivated class” (p. 192). Often a student’s gender, race, and/or class can predetermine the educational opportunities afforded to that student. Throughout the years of schooling, the layers of disadvantage accrue; and a student who has limited access to opportunities early on, has correspondingly fewer opportunities, as his or her education continues.

As stated by Oakes and Saunders (2008), “The much discredited policy of tracking a student’s education (often at an early age) with their purported intelligence or likely destination in the broader social and economic landscape is to separate students into college or vocational pathways” (p. 40). Tracking, as a foundation of the organizational structure in schools, serves to reinforce low expectations for students who are disproportionately minorities or who share a low socioeconomic status. Educators’ attitudes and beliefs may influence the practices that promote tracking. Dewey (1938) stated, “Educators are the agents through which knowledge and skills are communicated and the rules of conduct are enforced” (p. 18). The belief system that supports tracking can be evidenced in classrooms all over the United States, and it is reinforced by educators. The hidden curriculum evident in the classroom is exemplified by the language used by teachers. Teachers may illustrate that achievement trumps ability and aspirations often by the use of vocabulary or phrasing. A teacher using phrases like “low kids” or “advanced kids” sends subtle messages to students, not only about their achievements, but also about their aptitude. Teachers’ actions and expectations reinforce a student classification system. When students’ learning differences are reinforced by tracking, students receive a message of their teachers’ low expectations for them.
To a degree, tracking is socially acceptable segregation that is reinforced by teachers, parents, and communities. As a landmark case, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ushered in an era of desegregation in public education. When the disparity of the achievement gap between Whites and Blacks became more apparent, tracking initiatives were implemented nationally, in an effort to appease white parents. According to Ravitch (1983), “The problem of assigning students to one of four tracks on the basis of ability: tracking was described as an appropriate response to the disparate learning needs of children, but it was also a reassurance to white parents that desegregation would not lower standards” (p. 149).

As noted by Nieto (2010) “For teachers of the dominant culture who have little knowledge of cultures, experiences, or feelings of their students from bicultural backgrounds, trying to understand them poses an even greater challenge. Sometimes teachers may use their ignorance of diversity to maintain that adjusting the curriculum and instruction to their students’ backgrounds makes little sense; that is, teachers may reason that if students need to assimilate anyway, why change the curriculum?” (p. 157).

Some teachers view learning as the dissemination of knowledge from teacher to student, without incorporating the experiences of the student into the equation. Other teachers realize the value of the experience of students and use it to further educational experiences. Dewey (1938) wrote,

There is incumbent upon the teacher who links education and actual experience together a more serious and a harder business. He must be aware of the potentialities for leading students into new fields which belong to experiences already had, and must use this knowledge as his criterion for selection and arrangement of the conditions that influence their present conditions. (p. 76)
In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire confirmed the need for agreement and collaboration between the relationship of educator and student. Freire proposed that both parties must play both teacher and student. Freire also described some of the attitudes and practices of educators that serve to oppress society and specifically education. Freire (1970) stated, “The teacher chooses and enforces his choice and students comply; the teacher chooses the program content, and the students adapt to it” (p. 73). Tracking reinforces an imbalance of power in classrooms that drives student outcomes. Reconciliation of this inequity can inform more equitable options for students.

Tracking socializes students to a hierarchical system, whereby the peer group becomes increasingly more homogenous as students transition from grade to grade. As students transition to each subsequent level, their class composition becomes more homogenous and often racially and socioeconomically stratified. The opportunities to learn from higher achieving peers decreases, as students move to high school. As articulated by Petrovich and Wells (2009), “Summarizing the empirical literature from several decades Oakes, Muir, and Joseph (2000) report that students in high tracks generally have more challenging instruction than do those in low ability classes. They conclude the rudimentary curriculum content in low tracks frequently locks students into low tracks because they are not exposed to the prerequisite knowledge required to transfer to higher levels” (p. 57). Additionally, students in higher tracks often have the benefit of highly qualified teachers with more credentials and experience. Hallinan (2004), citing the research of Darling-Hammond (1995), concurred: “Teachers in poorly funded schools tend to be less experienced and have scant knowledge of alternative pedagogical or current curriculum thinking” (p. 75).
Other evidence against tracking includes the unilateral placement of students with disabilities into separate classrooms, such as resource rooms. This environment may be selected to meet the needs of students; however, many students are placed in these classes because they are cost effective for the district. In many instances, the composition of students is disproportional with respect to race and socioeconomic status. These classes are often composed of nonwhite males who are from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Consequently, homogenous learning environments lead to restrictive educational opportunities that do not allow for the accumulation of social and educational capital, diminish academic performance, and widen the achievement gap.

According to Noguera (2008) many students experience racial and social inequity through the hidden curriculum of a school or classroom: For African American males who are more likely than any other group to be subjected to negative forms of treatment in school, the message is clear that individuals of their race and gender may excel in sports but not history or math. The location of African American males within schools—in remedial classes or waiting for discipline outside the principal’s office—and the roles they perform suggest they are good at playing basketball or rapping, but debating, writing for the school paper, or participating in the science club is strictly out of bounds” (p. 31).

Another example of tracking is the Advanced Placement (AP) program, which is widely acknowledged as a pathway to college admission and foundational to academic success in post-secondary education. In 2008, more than fifteen percent of students graduating from high school had passed at least one AP course. The majority of these students were white and affluent. In its 2008 report on the AP testing program, the College Board indicated that, while fourteen percent of the senior’s graduating were African American, only eight percent of these students
participated in the AP program and only four percent passed at least one exam. The data offered by Zarate and Pachon (2006) in the report *Equity in Offering Advance Placement Courses in California (1997-2003)* confirmed significant achievement gaps in access to AP programs among minority students. While these data were collected in California, it mirrors a national trend: African American and Hispanic students are disproportionally underrepresented in this rigorous level of course offerings across high schools in the United States. Access to this program is a predictor for success in college, and students engaged in AP classes are more likely to graduate from college. This high stakes program must be accessible to all students, and the disparity in access must be addressed through K-12 educational interventions that enable all students to develop the foundation skills necessary to access this curriculum.

Another dilemma with respect to AP programming is the systemic economic influences in a state, city or local district that may limit access to AP programs. The data presented by Zarate and Pachon (2006) cogently demonstrate that rural and small districts offer fewer AP opportunities. The study also illustrates that larger, urban schools with higher minority enrollments exhibit a disproportionate majority representation of White and Asian students in AP programs.

The lack of adequate funds or misapplication of financial resources may account for some of the discrepancies in access to and equity in accelerated programs. Additionally, the lack of budgetary resources often force school committees and educational leaders to reduce or eliminate programs—often without analyzing the systemic impact on students across K-12 institutions. Shortsighted financial decision making may protect AP classes, but it may have the unintended consequence of reducing or limiting the supporting K-8 programs that allow students to develop the foundational skills necessary to achieve success at the AP level. Students lacking
the prerequisite skills are less likely to commit to advanced classes if their preparatory classes were inadequate. Thus students in less affluent communities have limited access to rigorous programs and academic credentials.

The unmet need for educational credentials is significant for students without social or economic status. The accumulation of credentials is effected by access to a rigorous course of study and is essential to academic success. School districts that sustain the tracking system may limit access to educational programs. Students need access to program that reinforce academic skills, to higher level courses that can be reflected on transcripts, and opportunities required to attain the capital to be successful in college and careers.

Various factors have been revealed to affect educators’ decision and policy making. This is also true among superintendents and, as discussed in Chapter 1, with regards to the current study’s theoretical framework, superintendents’ beliefs and attitudes about intelligence can affect their decision making and, thus, influence students’ learning outcomes. With respect to tracking, Oakes and Lipton (2000) suggested that superintendents, as the authorities in schools, may believe that the creation of educational categories serve to easily identify differences in children. This provides a strong rationale for imposing tracking and enabling adults to use labels to limit access to educational programs. An examination of the evolution of these beliefs and attitudes may serve to explain why tracking practices still prevail in many communities.

Studies by Bandura and Dweck (1981) concurred with Oakes and Lipton (2000) regarding the perceptions of student intelligence and the impact of adults’ perceptions, with respect to student outcomes. The authors found that students’ perception of their own intelligence affected achievement. Students’ self-perception of their intelligence was also linked to educators’ beliefs regarding student intelligence. In addition, other studies have identified a
correlation between students’ concepts of their own intelligence and the educator or superintendent’s view or attitude with regards to student intelligence.

Research on learning theory and how intelligence is perceived may inform an understanding of how superintendents’ beliefs are influenced by their social identities and how this affects decision making and policy implementation (Bandura & Dweck, 1985; Bandura, 1986 & Dweck, 2000). Many factors influence the evolution of personal beliefs and value systems. The process by which education leaders’ beliefs inform decision making is critical to supporting students’ positive outcomes. Beliefs that are grounded in stereotypes or that make inaccurate assumptions about student abilities may undermine equitable access to educational programs for students. Some individuals ascribe to the theory that intelligence is fixed: We all are born with a given quantity of intelligence, and it is non-malleable, irrespective of experience and environment. This entity theory posits that our individual intelligence is static and unchanging (Bandura & Dweck, 1985; Dweck & Leggett, 1998; Dweck, 2006). The theory that intelligence is not a fixed entity is described by Bandura and Dweck (1985) as an “incremental theory” of intelligence. According to this theory, intelligence is malleable. Incremental theory reinforces the perception that, as individuals develop, they should be engaged to learn without preset notions about their abilities or capacities.

Dweck (1975) explored the role of expectations and attributions of intelligence in student outcomes, as these designations affected educators’ perceptions on students’ intelligence. Collaborative studies by the author also confirmed that the superintendent’s view of intelligence may affect and vary his/her decision making. For example, if a teacher believes that a student’s intelligence is fixed, then the educator may doubt his/her ability to advance the student’s knowledge and, thus, may set into motion the principle of the self-fulfilling prophecy. This can
then compromise the educator’s ability to teach the student. Based upon the studies mentioned here, as well as in other research that explored the incremental and entity theories of intelligence, there is a connection between students’ perceptions of self and intelligence and how educators perceive students and their purported abilities and aptitudes.

An understanding of how the beliefs of education leaders inform their view of intelligence may result in better outcomes for students. Adherence to a perception that intelligence is either fixed or malleable may inform the belief system of individuals who maintain educational authority. An understanding of how the superintendent perceives learning and intelligence is essential to developing an awareness of how these beliefs may inform decision making.

The norms and cultural milieu which a student brings to school may also impact outcomes and opportunities. Often, society presents a set of cultural norms that may not align with the background of students who have a different set of cultural or social mores. Bowles and Gintis (1976) argued that students from middle and upper class socioeconomic backgrounds are rewarded for classroom behaviors that correspond to personality traits preferred by teachers and which are valued in the workplace. These attributes, such as compliance, obedience, or manners for social interaction may be rewarded by both teachers and supervisors in the workplace. Students without this type of social and cultural capital may be not have access to the same rewards and may be less successful in school, as a result. While this lack of capital is not a result of intelligence, it may impact outcomes for some students.

Students assigned to lower tracks demonstrate higher rates of dropping out of school. The process of dropping out begins long before the decision to withdraw formally from school. According to Brint (1998), “Drop-out rates among lower track students are approximately 10
percent higher than would be expected for otherwise similar students in untracked schools” (p. 231). Dropping out results from poor school attendance, which often results from a curriculum that is un-engaging or boring and that often lacks rigor, relevance, or expectations. Often, students who leave school without a diploma lack the social capital to remain engaged in school. The act of leaving school without a diploma is not often due to a lack intelligence or ability, but may result from a lack of social and emotional support from school authorities whose beliefs and perceptions about intelligence often drive programmatic decision making. Creating opportunities for high-risk students to engage in positive relationships with peers, teachers, mentors and administrators, as well as encouraging engagement in school activities may help to reduce dropout rates (Mahoney, 2000). The perception that school personnel care about their students is one of the most significant predictors of academic achievement (Wentzel, 1998).

The notion of habitus, as theorized by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), refers to how the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of an individual are shaped by society and a peer group. The social capital required to be successful in school is often challenging for some to attain. Tracking practices often serve to reinforce habitus: individuals are often compelled to make choices based on their experiences and often do not have the skills or capital to seek alternative options. Some families do not have the middle class capital to prevent or change the status of their children before they are slotted into roles in the school setting. In the book Ain’t No Makin’ It (2009), MacLeod presented a case study for the evolution of attitudes and experience, based on race and socioeconomic status in an urban environment. The experiences of the students, followed longitudinally, demonstrated that a lack of experience and the acceptance of placement in society—i.e., in school environments—negatively affect students’ aspirations and achievement. MacLeod (2009) described this impact: “Frankie and his wife were still somewhat
handicapped by their lack of middle class cultural capital. Both agree that they would have made other choices about their son’s education had they better understood how the public school system worked” (p. 454). As an example of social reproduction, tracking reinforces the social stratification of a class based society which is grounded in attitudes and behaviors that may be reinforced by schools. MacLeod (2009) cited Bowles and Gintis (1976) who postulate, “Schools train the wealthy to take places at the top of the economy while conditioning the poor to accept their lowly status in class structure” (p. 12). The assignment of students into lower educational tracks may serve to limit the expectations of students. This lack of expectation may be reinforced by teachers and confirmed by depressed achievement patterns. Given the lack of curricular rigor and a tendency toward low achievement that continues as students advance in school, students are not able to accumulate social or cultural capital or acquire the requisite skills to be successful in higher tracks. The cycle is self-perpetuating, and students are not able to obtain the capital necessary to break from the cycle. Thus, they are not equipped with the skills needed for higher education or highly skilled employment. Nieto (2010), citing the research of Spring (1995), wrote, “His review of the literature demonstrated that tracking, school counseling, disciplinary practices, participation in extracurricular activities, and instructional methods are correlated with the social class and race of students” (p. 56).

The literature suggests that the process of identifying and sorting students by ability does not result in achieving equitable educational goals, access, or outcomes among students. A number of critical studies have shown that assignment into tracks has less to do with intellectual ability and more to do with other background factors, such as race or socioeconomic status. The assignment of students into prescribed groups socializes and sorts them into specific roles and functions within the larger society—thus, limiting their opportunities to access the social and
cultural capital required to have unlimited life choices.

The superintendent’s demographic characteristics may also play a significant role in shaping their beliefs and decision making when it comes to student intelligence and tracking. However, little research has attempted to confirm this relationship. In one of the few existing studies, Anderson, Greene, and Loewen (1988) mentioned that female educators reported higher degrees of self-efficacy, which may translate to a more positive perception of students’ intelligence and capacity to learn. In terms of demographics Midgley, Feldlaufer, and Eccles (1988) suggested that elementary school educators were more efficacious than teachers at the secondary level of education. Nevertheless, in terms of race and other demographic indicators, more research is needed.

The focus of this study is on superintendents’ social identities, which are shaped by their perceptions and beliefs and shape their leadership and decision making on tracking. Tajfel (1972) defined the concept of social identity as a person’s awareness of his/her acceptance and belonging to a certain social or cultural group, which provides some form of emotional worth that is considered to be significant for one’s membership in the group. Social identity is an individual’s perception of who one is, as one relates to the group(s) with which one is affiliated. Tajfel (1979) proposed that the affiliations of an individual (e.g., in terms of social class, family, religious group, racial identification, etc.) are a source of identification and pride that give one meaning about one’s self. Social identity is the vehicle we use to characterize our place in our world and to make sense of our environment.

In an effort to organize our view of the world, we use social identity to sort our environment into social groups with which we align or from which we distance ourselves (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Based on this postulation, we continually use our identity to inform
our perceptions of others and attempt to stratify where others fit into our paradigm. One of the
tenets of social identity theory is that individuals will seek out members and views that align
with their beliefs and perceptions and will distance themselves from individuals, groups, beliefs
and perceptions that are at odds with their self-identity (Hogg, 2001).

Superintendents compose a group that derives its descriptive and evaluative identity or
social meaning as defined by perceptions of other groups. Social identity theorists offer that
individuals have a tendency to categorize others into groups on the basis of similarities or
differences, and that groups that are similar to individuals are more likely to receive favor
(Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Social identity is manifested in stereotyping, discrimination, or
decision making that may be inclusive or exclusive as a function of the level of conflict or
solidarity between individuals and a group. As postulated by Hogg (2001), the social identity, as
a foundation for educational leadership, relies on the results of interactions between the leader
and subordinate stakeholders. As leaders, school superintendents oversee subordinates with goal
setting, establish rewards systems (i.e., compensation) and establish the policies that govern the
organization. As a leader of a school district the superintendent, by definition of the role and
authority, represents an imbalance of power with other stakeholders. The beliefs and perceptions
that inform the leader’s social identify may influence how he/she makes educational decisions,
with respect to setting policy and practices.

The concept of social identity, as it relates to decision making within organizations, has
been overlooked in the field of research. As suggested by this research, an understanding of how
this concept of self-identification informs beliefs and perceptions may alter local educational
practices to more effectively serve students. The literature shows that the process of identifying
and sorting students by ability does not result in achieving equitable educational goals, but rather
socializes students and sorts them into specific functional roles in society (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu, 1979, 1990; Giroux, 1981, 2001 & Oakes, 1985). A number of studies critical of tracking underscore the fact that assignment into tracks often has less to do with intellectual ability than with other factors such as neatness and dress, politeness, obedience to authority, punctuality and following directions (Nieto, 2000, 2004). Influential research by Oakes, Welner, Mickelson, Petrovich and Saunders are reviewed in order to understand the academic and social impacts of tracking on students. Research by Ansalone & Biafora (2004) reaffirmed educators as the main sponsors and decision makers in determining policies for ability grouping, as well as the track placement of specific students. Much research on the issue of tracking focuses on the advantages and disadvantages of grouping practices and examines whether it is preferable for students to learn in homogeneous groups or heterogeneous groups (Barr & Dreeben, 1983; Hallinan, 1994 & 2004; Kulik & Kulik, 1992). Researchers have shown repeatedly that pupils in lower tracks tend to achieve less and fail more often than do pupils in higher tracks (Lee & Bryk, 1988; Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Hallinan & Kubitschek, 1999; Van Houtte, 2004). Bandura and Dweck’s research on teachers’ beliefs and attitudes advances the connection of some educators’ fixed mindset and provides evidence that a hidden curriculum exists in the classroom, with respect to expectations for student learning. This narrative study serves as the foundation to explore how the beliefs, perceptions and social identities of school superintendents inform their decision making, with respect to the preponderance of tracking practices evident in their school district. The literature provides examples of how the beliefs of students, parents, teachers, and principals impact tracking practices. The literature shows that there has been minimal data on how the superintendent may influence these practices. This research offers insights and adds to the field of knowledge to inform changes within school districts, in order to
facilitate more equitable opportunities and effective outcomes for students.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

Tracking or ability grouping is an educational policy and practice that impacts educational access and outcomes for students (Rees, Arygs & Brewer, 1996; Hanushek & Woesmann, 2005; Oakes, 2005). Although the practice of tracking is evidenced in schools, these policies and practices have negative economic, political and social impacts on student outcomes (Oakes, 1985, 1991, 1997; Gamoran, 1986, 1987 & Welner, 2000). School based policies and practices may serve to widen achievement gaps and limit educational access and opportunities (Oakes, 1990). The attitudes and beliefs of a school superintendent may affect how the leader makes decisions on the implementation of policies and practices with respect to tracking and ability grouping.

Research Questions

This study seeks to understand how school superintendents describe their beliefs about intelligence and how those beliefs impact decision making on the policies/practices of tracking by asking the following: How do superintendents describe the evolution of their social identity and the impact of their social identity on the policy of tracking?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this narrative study is to understand how the social identity and beliefs of educational leaders, specifically the superintendent of schools, may affect decision making that maintains the practice of tracking in secondary public educational programs. This narrative study explores the social identity of superintendents and their attitudes and beliefs about intelligence and the influence on educational decision making.

Positionality

The researcher’s positionality relative to this study is carefully addressed. As the role of
the researcher’s identity influences the understanding of the central phenomena being examined, it is imperative that the researcher is cognizant of any conflicts or ethical considerations which may confound data collection. The underlying beliefs, attitudes, and worldview of the researcher may impact perceptions and representations of the situations and stories of participants. With respect to this research, the positionality of this researcher to participants is one of a collegial nature. The researcher is not a supervisor, nor is there any imbalance of power, conflict of interest, or ethical bias.

Gender, race, socioeconomic status, educational and professional background, and experience may impact the perspectives I bring to this research. Therefore, it is expected that I not share my experiences or beliefs with participants. For the purpose of full disclosure, my beliefs on tracking are grounded in the research that it is harmful to students—specifically, students who may have limited options and opportunities. As a student, my learning environments were largely homogenous and lacked diversity or inclusion. As a student, I was aware of the lack of academic expectations for many of my peers. The treatment that some students experienced seemed inequitable and unfair. I am now engaged in a position of authority, and I have therefore endeavored to make changes within my district. The preponderance of research describes the negative impacts of tracking practices. Therefore, it is puzzling that these organizational structures are maintained and reinforced. By taking on this research, I hope to understand the beliefs and perceptions of superintendents and to further understand their role in decision making with respect to this educational practice.

The potential outcomes of this research that may pose harm to the participants are important considerations. If a participant revealed experiences that are highly personal, there may be a negative impact on the individual and their professional agency. It was imperative to
seek permission to use all recollections and to enable the participant to review results, as part of the research process and prior to publication. As the qualitative interview progressed some of the questions elicited recollections and stories that were highly personnel and some responses were emotional in nature. The researcher actively listened and was attentive to the body language of participants. The researcher consistently asked if the participant was comfortable sharing the recollections and stories. The researcher maintained respect for the participant and the interview process. Transparency of data enhanced the study’s credibility and trustworthiness. Within the construct of a narrative, the shared individuals’ experiences, and the understanding of these experiences may influence a broader audience and inform the perspectives of the researcher and participants (Clandinin, 2013).

**Research Design**

The research paradigm that is applicable to this study is one of social constructivism. As cited by Creswell (2013), a constructivist paradigm necessitates a thoughtful reflection on experiences based on interactions with others and through the interaction with social and cultural norms. The meanings and interpretations have a social and historical underpinning and inform the manner in which individuals make sense and understand their beliefs and environment. This paradigm required the researcher to make sense of the experiences of the participant and place them in context with social and cultural norms. With respect to implementation of a research project, the interview questions were designed to be broad, so that the participants are able to construct meaning, and the researcher must allow for a more general conversation, rather than a question-directed interview. A qualitative narrative study is the most appropriate approach for this research project, because the problem of practice seeks to understand the experiences that may inform the development of superintendents’ identity, beliefs, and attitudes as they engage in
educational decision making, with respect to the policies and practices of educational tracking.

Qualitative research, by design, is inductive and descriptive (Merriam, 2002). Trustworthiness and validity in qualitative research is regarded as subjective, rather than objective, and there are no variables to manipulate or quantifiable outcomes to be analyzed. The experiences of a phenomenon are described and interpreted within the context of a naturalistic setting. A qualitative study using a narrative approach seeks to develop an understanding of the experiences of participants. According to Creswell (2009), “Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). This approach allows the researcher to explore personal stories and experiences with participants. One essential reason this qualitative approach is apposite is that the process reveals a deeper understanding of experiences, with an emphasis on naturalistic inquiry (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). The evolution of data on beliefs and attitudes are not controlled and the participant is able to situate and explore personal experiences and life stories within the narrative. The narrative approach allows the researcher to analyze and understand the experiences of the individuals and organize them thematically to support the underlying theory and research questions. According to Maxwell (2005), “Design in qualitative research is an ongoing process that involves tacking back and forth between different components of the design assessing the implication of the goals, theories, research questions, methods and validity threats” (p. 3). Qualitative research was selected for this research in an effort to understand the experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of the participants and how these experiences affect decision making. A deeper understanding of the personal and professional experience of school superintendents enabled the participants to tell their stories, in an effort to describe how their experiences influence the decisions they make with respect to policies that effect students.
Qualitative research often has a foundation in philosophy. Philosophically, this study relies on an ontological assumption as it seeks to understand how the individual reality or realities of the researcher and the participants are subjective and how they may inform or bias beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions that may influence the development of themes and perspectives. As reported by Creswell (2013) ontological philosophical assumptions may yield data that evidences the “multiple realities” of both researchers and participants. Based on multiple perspectives and realities, the data recorded informed the development of themes that influenced the study outcomes. As posited by Moustakes (1994), when compiling a phenomenological study, it is essential to understand how the varied understandings and perspectives of the participants may represent a wide range of viewpoints.

As individuals in this study are the sum of their experiences and life stories, using endpoints and variables is not a preferable method to reflect on the participants’ interests, motivations, and experiences. A quantitative study could collect survey data from a wide range of experimental subjects and the data could be correlated to hypotheses. Quantitative data could elicit trends and outcomes; however, a qualitative approach enables the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the narrative, or the underlying story. The interpretive and subjective nature of qualitative research may offer advantages and, conversely, disadvantages. The underlying subjectivity allows the researcher to gain insight onto and understanding of the experiences of the participants. However, the researcher must be cognizant of not allowing personal bias and experiences to influence the development and interpretation of the themes.
Research Tradition

As evidenced in the literature, the practice of educational tracking has an educational, social, and financial impact on access and opportunities for students (Oakes, 1990; Oakes & Saunders, 2008). As an organizational structure evidenced in secondary education, the decision-making of school superintendents impacts the implementation of this practice. By engaging decision-makers—i.e., the superintendent of schools—in a qualitative study, this researcher developed a deeper understanding of how the beliefs, attitudes and social identities of school leaders impact decision making on the organizational structure of secondary educational programs. The data collected elicited insights and experiences from individuals. The evolution of themes and insights describe how the prevalence of attitudes and beliefs may impact decision making, with respect to the practice of tracking. An understanding of the personal and professional experiences of educational leaders and how those experiences may influence decision making is the qualitative tradition that forms the foundation of this study. This qualitative study uses principles from the narrative tradition, a process that gives participants the voice in a study and the opportunity to contextualize and make sense of their experiences. The narrative format is an appropriate tradition to explore the experiences of participants.

This narrative study proposed to collect the stories and experiences of participants and to organize meaning through the development of themes. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggested that collected stories and experiences should be organized and categorized by the researcher and then analyzed into themes. The analysis of participants’ stories and experiences is a type of narrative that effectively informs this study. These narrative stories and experiences sought to reveal the identities of the individuals and to endeavor to make sense of and interpret the experiences within the context of theory (Creswell, 2013).
Participants

The nature of a narrative inquiry is suited to exploring the stories or life experiences of an individual or group of individuals (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, Creswell (2007) suggested including a small number of participants for any narrative inquiry. Therefore, my proposal included a population of four experienced superintendents who have served in their roles for at least five years. These superintendents were invited to participate and represented suburban districts with a high school population of between 500 and 1000 students. The rationale for these inclusion criteria is that superintendents serving in this role for five years have had time to learn the culture of the community and commence change initiatives. An examination of leaders who work within districts with a secondary student population ranging in size from 500 to 1000 students reflects a variety of academic course offerings and programs. In order to understand the beliefs and processes for stratifying students, there need to be a range of opportunities for access to programs. The rationale for the method of purposeful sampling is to inform a more effective understanding of the central phenomena being proposed. In qualitative research, the sample of participants impacts the outcomes and transferability of the research. As indicated in the research design, sampling in qualitative research must be selective and purposeful (Creswell, 2007). As stated by Maxwell (2005) purposeful sampling is warranted so that the sample of participants is appropriate to assess the applicable underlying theories and develop a better understanding of the phenomena being researched. Using a sample that is not representative of the individual or setting being studied will not elicit results that are transferable or generalizable. The lack of a purposeful sample diminishes the strength of the qualitative study and will not yield any data on the processes, meanings, or influences that are being explored.

Participants responded to the invitation via email. Of the six individuals who responded
with two were not considered as the high school enrollment in their school was too small. A high school with an enrollment under 500 does not offer a wide range of courses and academic levels. The four participants selected were selected as they represented suburban communities with enrollment that met inclusion criteria. The districts all had a wide range of educational programs and academic levels range from College Preparatory and Honors to Advanced Placement. Each district is different with respect to student demographics. The socioeconomic status of each community varies. Eric’s community has the highest percent of students living in poverty and many are recent immigrants to the US. Tom’s district has the least social, economic and cultural diversity. Both Linda and Susan’s school districts are more typical of suburban communities with poverty levels within the three percent range and some diversity.

With respect to the structure of education within their districts all participants reported that there are tracked classes in the high school setting. A review of the Program of Studies from each high school shows that there is College Preparatory, Honors and Advanced Placement at all schools. At two of the schools there are some vocational opportunities. Prerequisites vary and at all of the schools parents and students have authority to override the placement recommendations of teachers. All of the schools have elective options that are untracked. All of the schools offer a wide range of programs for students with disabilities and there are many inclusion options for students.

**Recruitment and Access**

Upon approval of the Informed Consent Form (Appendix A) by the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct this study, the researcher solicited participants via letter and email communication (Appendix B). Using the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents’ (MASS) listserve, I accessed email and contact
information for all superintendents in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The inclusion criteria specified participants needed to be in their role for at least five years. Also they needed to represent districts in the Metrowest suburbs. Finally their high school needed to have an enrollment of between 500 and 1,000 students. The invitation letter was sent and included the Informed Consent Form (Appendix A). Participants responded by email or phone contact. A total of four participants were invited to meet for a series of three interviews scheduled for 45-60 minutes each. Interviews were scheduled at a site chosen by each participant and at a time designated by each participant. The scheduling of interview sessions was done via email and/or phone call (the email invitation is included as Appendix C). The structure of interviews was outlined as follows: Session I focused on collecting demographic data, stories from childhood, and experiences in K-12 education. Session II explored stories from higher education and professional experiences. Session III explored leadership within the district and participants’ narratives of experiences in the school district setting (interview questions are outlined in Appendix D).

During the recruitment process, prospective participants were informed of the commitment they were being asked to make. They were informed of their rights both orally and in writing. Participants were treated with respect and confidentiality and were advised that they could opt out at any time in the process. The complaint process was also articulated, and all participants were given the appropriate contact information to ask questions or report any abuse or impropriety. All details are outlined in the Informed Consent Protocol (Appendix A).

Protection of Human Subjects

When research is conducted that relies on human subjects as participants, the researcher must strictly adhere to all federal, state, and local regulations and codes. Compliance with NIH
guidelines for the protection of human subjects is the foundation for the development of the approval documents, which have been subjected to review and approval by the Northeastern University IRB. Informed consent (Appendix A) was extensively reviewed with all participants, and the researcher complied with confidentiality guidelines with respect to data collection, storage, and the dissemination of results. Given that this study is a narrative, collaboration between participants and researchers has been collegial and cooperative. In order to assure that all participants fully understand the informed consent procedures, each participant was emailed a copy of procedures before the study was initiated. Procedures were also reviewed in person with each participant. Each participant signed two copies: one for their records and one for the researcher. Participants were reminded that they maintained the right to opt out of the study at any time. Additionally, the research design protects the anonymity of participants, as did with all data collected. Appendix A outlines the proposed Informed Consents document, clearly articulates all protections, and confirms the sanctity of the human rights of all study participants.

**Data Collection**

Data collection through first person accounts has included the collection of stories of the participants in this study. According to Clandinin and Connolly, (2000) narrative stories are the lived and told experiences garnered through interviews and observations. The interview methodology applied in their study was a qualitative interview process called responsive interviewing, as outlined by Rubin and Rubin (2012). This strategy for conducting interviews challenges the researcher to be flexible and ready to change questions as the conversation progresses. As the researcher collects the narrative stories and descriptions, he/she sets the stage for the process of reflection and emergence of themes. This methodology outlines an interview process that consists of asking a set of main questions, which are linked to the research
questions. Using probing questions, the researcher adds follow up questions to maintain the pace of the interview. Probing questions keep the conversation engaged and ongoing and allow the participant to share his or her stories, with minimal interruption. The last set of questions is composed of the follow-up questions used to clarify points or elaborate on key concepts. It enables the researcher to delve deeper into meanings and uncover potential themes or consistent patterns in the narrative story. Rubin and Rubin (2012) challenged the researcher to always maintain a focus, listen for meanings, and be curious and inquisitive, without being intrusive.

For the purpose of confidentiality each participant was assigned a coded number to protect his or her identity. In order to protect the identity of each participant, the assigned code was used to collect and maintain data. Interviews were tape recorded and the researcher took field notes. Using two tape recorders for each interview enabled the securement of a backup copy, in the event of a technology failure. Recorded interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription agency, I Dictate. This agency only had access to the assigned code number. Transcripts were coded using NVivo 10 software. Each line of the transcripts was coded to identify 26 parent nodes that aligned with the interview questions. Subcategories were created as the coding was refined. A coded notebook for each participant was prepared so that the data was not intermingled. The researcher was the only individual with access to the unique codes for participants. All interviews and field notes were organized by the participant code number. After each session, transcripts were disseminated to participants for review and revision. At the end of the third interview the researcher engaged in member checking to verify the accuracy and authenticity of all transcripts.
Data Storage

During the data collection phase all recorded tapes, field notes, and consent documents were kept in case files that were transported in a locked box. Between interview sessions, data were stored in a locked, fireproof file cabinet. The key to the identification code was maintained in a separate secure file. As the dissertation documents were being completed on a dedicated computer, the documents were backed up on the same computer and on an external hard drive. Access to the office is limited to me, and all files were password protected. Upon completion and defense of this study, raw data was destroyed as outlined in the IRB protocol.

Data Analysis

Based on the approved interview protocol, sessions were recorded and field notes were taken. The data collection focused on the collection of personal stories and experiences. The experiences shared with the researcher were organized into a matrix outlining a chronology of similar experiences or events, and the data was generalized to identify themes and common threads. Narrative research relies on the collection of experiences to organize a thematic thread or plot to inform the structure of storytelling. Using plot, themes, and characters, the combined stories of participants resulted in a commonality of experience that they collectively shared.

Collected data was organized and coded, and then were collapsed to identify five to seven themes (Creswell, 2009). According to Riesman (1993), narrative research is an effective tradition for giving a voice to participants and validating their life stories and experiences. In order to effectively analyze participants’ stories and experiences, a literary form of data collection was utilized. As described by Saldaña (2009), a structural analysis of the narratives focuses on the plot revealed through the narratives. The analysis is formed by the repertoire of the shared stories, which informs the organization of the particular narrative elements. With
respect to this paradigm, the story elements —i.e., events, plots, characters, bystanders etc.—are through the review of the transcripts. The analysis of chronological and non-chronological aspects of the stories is integral to organizing the themes. Narratives are the succession of events or episodes that comprise characters, actions, and contexts. The narration of events and the chronological ordering allow for the interpretation of how the stories are used by the researcher. The researcher explored the similarities and codes to elicit themes and consistencies in the life events of the participants. Narrative coding relies on the structures of literary storytelling. Therefore, the researcher may organize experiences according to categories such as plot, character, points of view, and literary elements such as motif, allusion, or symbolism.

According to Saldaña (2009) second cycle coding is applied to engage in the process of connecting data collected to broader themes. Narrative research requires an emic focus that is a representation of environment or setting and which emanates from the participants’ points of view and through their terms. The researcher therefore focused on recording the retelling of stories and offering context. The use of longitudinal coding as a strategy to organize stories and reflections of participants enabled the researcher to organize and categorize information in preparation for the analysis. This coding strategy also allowed the researcher to identify emerging and consistent themes and experiences. Additionally, the researcher captured “turning points” or epiphanies that the participants related.

As the researcher reviewed the transcripts for similarities, evidence of thematic units evolved. In order to effectively apply thematic coding, the researcher thoroughly read the transcripts and applied initial codes to seek commonalities and develop broad themes. Once a set of themes were identified, they were focused and narrowed in scope. The themes were analyzed and the narrative was constructed. Within this study, participant stories were organized into an
inductive analysis and were analyzed through a constructivist paradigm.

**Trustworthiness and Transferability**

Creswell (2007) stated that, for any study to be valid and reliable, four conditions must be met: Validity, credibility, criticality, and integrity must be evident for research to have any meaning or impact. As postulated by Creswell (2007), credibility relies on the accuracy of how the participant stories and experiences are transcribed and interpreted. Criticality requires the researcher to be mindful of personal biases and how they may impact outcomes and perceptions with respect to data collection. Authenticity is incorporated when multiple voices are reflected in data analysis and interpretations. If a researcher is able to be self-reflective and self-critical of his/her work as he/she collects data, then the study will have integrity.

Within this study, trustworthiness and credibility depended upon the identification of research bias. It is essential that the researcher reflects on potential biases and seeks to minimize his/her influence during data collection. Merriam (2009) indicated that the researcher’s values and exceptions have an impact on how the study is conducted and its potential outcomes. According to Creswell (2007), member checking is another strategy to ensure trustworthiness. This phenomenon occurs when the researcher allows participants to offer feedback concerning data and its interpretation. Transcripts of interviews were sent to participants to review and make any changes. They were asked to verify what transpired in each session. Following verification, the data were then coded for analysis.

The cornerstone of qualitative research is the development of rich, thick descriptions. As articulated by Creswell (2007), when rich, thick descriptions are evidenced, the findings may be transferable. In this study, data collection yielded rich and thick descriptions. Therefore, results and experiences may be shared and generalized to other educational leaders. The transferability
of the results is evidenced in the analysis and conclusions drawn from the life events of participants, as recorded and interpreted by the researcher within the framework of the research questions.

**Limitations**

Narrative research, as a tradition, is a reflexive and iterative process that begins as the data is collected. The researcher listened to the stories of participants and sought to conceptualize their experiences, in order to represent a setting in terms of the viewpoints of the participants. As with the paradigm, there are some limitations that need to be articulated: The sample size is small, and the researcher was unable to generate theory or broad generalizations. While research was being conducted, it was imperative to always consider the participants’ credibility. Additionally, the researcher needed to recognize if the answers were in response to the questions or were extemporaneous musings, while conducting the interviews. During this study, the researcher encountered only one instance when this phenomenon was experienced. In order to make an adjustment to data collection and in an effort to collect stories and experiences relevant to the topic, the interview time was extended and the researcher returned to the questions previously presented. Additionally, in order to minimize the impact of study limitations, the researcher necessarily discriminated on how to use and interpret the generated stories. The impact on participants in this research study must also be acknowledged: While conducting the interviews, the researcher was cognizant of the potential impact on their reputations and on the participant’s public credibility. Reflecting on the question, does engagement in this study have an impact on the participants’ responses? How does this impact alter their beliefs and/or social identity, with respect to educational decision making? In order to mitigate this issue, assuring confidentiality and protection of participant identity was essential.
The trust established between participants and the researcher was an essential covenant that was paramount to eliciting honest and open responses. In reviewing the transcripts and impressions created in the interviews, the researcher has noted that the participants were openly honest. Many of their responses were emotional and caused each participant to stop and reflect upon their choices and decisions. The interviews conducted produced a series of powerful conversations. If there were no level of trust or credibility between participants and researcher, then the data collected would have been less compelling.
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH RESULTS

Overview

Through a series of three narrative interviews with four participants—all school superintendents—data were collected to elicit stories and experiences through the personal narratives of participants, in order to understand the connections to their beliefs and how their beliefs inform decision making on the practice of tracking in secondary education. The four participating superintendents shared narrative stories that included reflections on the impact of socio-demographic data, childhood educational experiences, experiences in college and higher education, career choices, and factors affecting their decision making as superintendents. Of particular interest is the participants’ range of beliefs and perceptions regarding determining practices and policies within their educational institutions and the impact of their social identities and perceptions of learning and intelligence on their educational policy choices. Presentation of the results on each of the meaningful aspects is complemented with supporting quotes extracted from interview sessions and relevant inferences on identified themes.

Themes identified from an analysis of the data were elicited through the assignment of codes using NVivo 10 software. The coding process for qualitative research is logical and intuitive because this research utilizes inductive and deductive reasoning within the phases of coding. Inductive reasoning is noted as the researcher observes and deconstructs the whole into smaller parts or units of analysis. Deductive reasoning is used when the researcher initiates the development of generalizations or assumptions. In this study, open coding was used to develop descriptive themes and phrases. Axial coding was also employed to explore the development of pattern and emerging themes.
Impact of Demographic Data, Childhood and K-12 Experiences on Beliefs and Attitudes

Participants’ demographic data illustrate their varied childhood experiences and that they came from families with differing attitudes toward education. For example, Eric grew in a small town in XXX where the family embraced a strong emphasis on religion and traditions. His family structure was highly traditional: his father enlisted in the military after high school, and his mother pursued a career as a secretary after earning her high school degree. In this participant’s family, emphasis was placed on educational performance and meeting high expectations, exemplified by the parents and two older sisters who set high standards. Moreover, it was evident that Eric grew up in a diversity-tolerant, welcoming atmosphere, illustrated by a story of warm relations with X, the only African American child in the neighborhood, who was welcomed into Eric’s home and who became part of the family.

Tom was raised in a Roman Catholic family in X. The participant reported a more fractured, yet loving family dynamic. He described a parent who was incarcerated and not a strong role model. His story evolved to reflect his resiliency and his connections with other adults to find stability and context to pursue his educational credentials. An early influence was an uncle who was a professor of linguistics in Montreal and who might have affected his career choice and propelled him toward education. Tom also revealed a positive attitude toward ethnic diversity through his childhood experiences, as he recalled growing up in a diverse community.

Susan was raised in the suburbs of western Massachusetts and attended a parochial school in XXX. She recalled the positive example set by her father, that she was the first member of her family to pursue higher education and her own dream to become a lawyer, rather than her parents’ wish for her to become a doctor. This led to a recollection about the importance of
education. The participant shared stories about her mother’s negative experiences with her education, when she was subjected to violence because of her under-performance. This still led to her emphasis on the fact that all of her family, including parents and siblings, needed to be formally educated. These stories seemed to possess high symbolic significance for the participant. Susan also shared about her difficult childhood experiences as a child with an undiagnosed learning disability and of the hardships she experienced while learning to read and write. Finally, Linda discussed her upbringing in the city of XXX. As part of a large, Catholic family, she spoke of being a caregiver for younger siblings. Linda recalled the impact on her perception of self and how these experiences propelled her passion to do and be more. Linda learned early resiliency and how to rely on herself to meet her needs. The participant’s family had little formal education; so this was not a priority within the family structure. This participant was urged into a caretaker role early in her life, with her father being absent physically due to work constraints, and her mother being psychologically absent and struggling with the emotional challenges of raising a large family. This participant’s family background presented challenges, making it even more distinguishable that she was the only one of six children in her family to pursue education and achieve status in an educational career.

**Influence of Early School Experiences and Family Engagement**

Only Eric revealed a pattern of positive impressions about school experiences and offered a constructive account of the schooling process. In his narrative account, he mentioned that school represented a world filled with possibilities and teachers who consistently served the diverse needs of students. Eric remarked,

… teachers were just such lovely people; they would do everything to help the class be successful. Anything that you can imagine. Mrs. XXX in social studies would look for
materials when students would show a special interest in something. You’d, you’d come into school the next day, and she’d have three more books to show you.

Besides enjoying and being connected to school, recollections of the relationships and connections between student and teachers were noteworthy among the study participants. Eric felt highly challenged by academics and by connections to educators. Recalling an early interaction with a teacher who tried to help him zip his jacket without scolding him or making him feel as if he were not capable, he recalled her helping him by giving him a hug from behind. He recalled the teacher as saying that he had a “hugging jacket.” As a result of these types of interactions, this participant gave a positive evaluation of the atmosphere and climate in which students and teachers collaborated in his school:

There was a strong climate of respect and cooperation. I think all of the teachers probably had a workshop on, on cooperative learning or, or something about creating a healthy climate. I think that’s what I would describe it as, it was the middle school years, was a strong focus on healthy climate, respecting on one another, working well together, that was driven home by every single teacher.

However, other participants had to overcome specific hurdles in their educational programs, and each had some challenges to face. These experiences—some positive and some negative—informed their attitudes toward teachers and the overall educational system. As an example, Tom mentioned exhibiting some negative behaviors in school because his father was incarcerated while he was in his early school grades and his parents were divorcing. These events affected his attitude and behavior:

I was in third grade. I spent most of third grade in the principal’s office. At the time, my parents were…there was a lot of trouble at home and, you know, I think I was just
reacting to that…I love my parents, but it was a tough house to grow up in. I ended up spending a lot of time visiting him in prison, which was tough for me growing up. But it shapes you, you know?

Despite the fact that this participant recognized that his negative behavior was a reaction to family circumstances, he also observed that there was inadequacy in the schools’ response to the situation. He pointed out that his school, as with many other schools at that time, lacked professional psychological and social support. This aggravated his experiences in the school environment. He stated, “And you had kids in there…I remember kids throwing temper tantrums. Kids would throw their desks. It was crazy. Now, you think back and like wow there were kids in need of interventions.” Despite the negative behaviors, he reflected that, good or bad, the engagement of teachers was profound and impactful. He recalled, “You can go back and ask anyone. And they may not be able to remember the teachers they had, but they certainly remember the ones that made a difference in their lives or who believed in them or who just didn’t believe in them.”

Susan’s school experiences were shaped by undiagnosed learning disabilities that made school challenging. As she explained,

I just couldn’t spell. I didn’t have the phonemic awareness, you know, and I didn’t understand, I don’t understand phonics. It’s alien to me. Everything that I know, my language is all sight words. It’s all I know, that’s how I learned and I taught it myself.

This unaddressed disability resulted in many negative school experiences for this participant. With little support from educators or recognition of individual differences, Susan relied on accommodations and innate intelligence to succeed—despite her interactions with teachers. She recalled,
The biology teacher, oh my god the biology teacher. I had this biology teacher freshman year. Oh my gosh, I didn’t like her, she didn’t like me, whatever first quarter…Because every day I told her that she didn’t know how to teach and she wasn’t teaching to my learning style.

As a result of her family background and early experiences, Linda revealed herself to be a self-reliant individual who managed to overcome obstacles to succeed in obtaining educational credentials and career opportunities. As one of the eldest in a large Catholic family, Linda filled the role of caregiver for her smaller siblings from a very young age, which made her independent and self-reliant. Early on, she sought solace in her love of reading. When she discovered the public library, a new world opened to her. She reflected, “…the public library was a really great place in my education and very influential in terms of opening a world to me that I didn’t have at home because we did not have books in the home.” Linda expressed a desire to read and acknowledged its transformative effect on her education, giving her a unique opportunity for educational success. She recalled,

… the big difference I think between my siblings and myself is I was interested in reading and went to the library and they were not, and so even though I would suspect that if you were to take a test and give it to each of us, that our range of intelligence would not be significantly different. They’re all pretty smart. It was just I got the luck of the draw that I found reading and they didn’t.

Evidence from the narrative experiences illustrate the impact of family and some general school experiences on the participants, as well as the impact on their lives, educational outcomes, and who they would become as adults. Three of the participants faced distinct challenges that they had to overcome, and one had a more traditional life experience. All were driven by some
intrinsic voice to pursue knowledge and educational credentials. Whether the drive to excel was internal or external, all were driven by the need to achieve and be held to higher expectations. They all cited the role of educators and their impact on how they perceived themselves as learners in the educational environment.

**Educational Experiences and Connections with Educators**

Teachers play an essential role in the evolution of attitudes, beliefs perceptions, and impressions of education. Each of the participants had specific positive and negative reminiscences of school experiences. All participants clearly articulated and shared stories about the impact of exceptional teachers, as well as memories about teachers who had a negative impact on their view of the educational landscape. Eric recalled not enjoying his third grade experience because of an unskilled teacher: “…she just, she didn’t have any patience, she was a, she was a yeller”. However, most of Eric’s experiences reflected how helpful his teachers were. He highlighted the contributions they made in the educational progress of each child in his class: “I remember each teacher trying to put me in a position to be successful…There wasn’t and ‘I got you’ kind of mentality. There was always a supportive mentality. I mean, I was always told that I was bright.” As a result of this positive, helpful attitude, Eric reflected on school experiences as very pleasant and confessed to enjoying school very much. Teachers were role models that impacted the participant’s view of the world and how he perceived himself as a learner and individual.

Tom recalled early experiences in elementary school, when he began to react to his home life and acted out in school. His behavior in class resulted in many discipline referrals to the principal. He recalled,

But Bob XXX, the principal showed me he believed in me…He pulled me in and said,
hey, why don’t you guys set up these computers in classrooms. Then you can go around and teach the teachers how to use them. So that is what we did. So that was a turning point for me in education.

He added, “I completely turned it around and enjoyed going to school, looked forward to it. And largely because of this principal. It took one person, you know, who believed in you.”

The influence of the school principal for this individual impacted who he would become as an adult. He also recalled the impact of another elementary educator: Tom praised the warm attitude of some teachers, reflecting on how that support was crucial for him when his home life was in crisis. He recalled, “But then you have people like Mrs. XXX back in first grade who…she was phenomenal. And she was just loving and warm. And at a time where, you know, my home life was in some disrepair, she was a calming force.”

Conversely, Tom provided a detailed account of a conflict with his American government teacher who tore students’ textbooks and demanded five dollars to repair them. Other students did not challenge the behavior, due to their fear or that they were not willing to risk a potential reduction in grades. Tom, who had just returned from a year abroad to study in Germany, had developed self-reliance and independence and was not intimidated by the authority figure. He offered this recollection:

I told him, I am not comfortable giving you the five dollars, can you tell me where it is going? You are collecting all this money and no one is asking questions about where it is going. I want a receipt for it. He crumbled my five dollar bill and threw it at me and said keep your f***ing money.

He reflected, “That type of a teacher, who seemed to lack integrity, for me it was a big lesson in, you know, transparency, integrity, how you treat other people, you know,
accountability.”

Susan shared numerous negative accounts with teachers, largely because she had many unmet educational needs and often suffered with school behavioral consequences based on her skills with challenging the teachers’ authority. She confessed, “I was a rebel, but it was kind of funny.” She remembered receiving 52 detentions from her United States History 1 teacher and noted, “my freshman algebra teacher left the room with a nervous breakdown.” She also recalled failing classes for some of her personal beliefs. She said,

I remember the question on the exam was, ‘Explain evolution,’ or something. And I wrote, ‘I cannot explain it because I don’t believe in it. I believe in creation.’ That’s what I put down, and of course I flunked. So, first quarter, again, an F in biology.

Based on her accounts, she agreed she was not an easy student to work with at school. There were some encounters with educators, whereby the educators made assumptions about students and they made decisions based on their beliefs and attitudes about students. She recalled a conversation with her guidance counselor:

And so it was my junior year and I had my guidance counselor, he was awful. He was a jerk…He says, ‘Well you know, your grades aren’t good.’ I said, ‘Well I’m going to go to college.’ He goes, ‘No, you’re never going to get into college. You might go into a community college, but you’re never going to get to a four year college.’ So I applied to XXX College and I got accepted as a junior in high school…So he had called me down later on and he goes, ‘Well, you know, are you going to do something?’ I said, ‘Yeah.’ I said, ‘I’ve already been accepted to XXX.’ It shut him right up.

Linda, on the contrary, reported no negative experiences with teachers, largely due to her intrinsic motivation and passion for reading and learning. She knew that she had a unique
chance of learning what she could at school and because she needed to make her own opportunities, given that her family support was not focused on education. Based on her family experience and background, she used reading and learning to become a compliant student as she learned to play the school game. She recalled,

I was the kind of kid who teachers liked because I didn’t make any waves, I kept my mouth shut, I did my homework. But that second/third grade teacher who thought I was a little over confident and tried to give me a B+. It was one of the few times my parents came to a parent conference. My mother said, ‘Clearly, Linda knows how to read. What is the issue?’ And the teachers said, ‘She’s over-confident and I gave her a B+ because she is over-confident.

She continued to reflect: “I can remember asking my teachers questions that they didn’t know the answers to and they got a little rattled by that.”

Moreover, Linda was critical about teachers not being engaged in the process of teaching students. As she recalled of one teacher,

He would put the work on the board, and sort of we would work independently most of the time, and I would finish my work as quickly as possible and go and get a book to read and just all day long just read, read, read.

Such teachers were definitely unable to give high-quality education because of their disinterest in interactions with children. Therefore, this participant selected reading and learning as a pathway to a better life. She reflected,

I can sort of talk about my pathway to getting into education at some point, but when I became a teacher and coach I gravitated to quirky kids because I was aware there could have been things happening at home that had an influence on what they were able to
achieve.

She continued,

Adversity, and having to take on more responsibility, I think it made me recognize that there are different pathways that students can take to be successful. And asking everyone to do the same thing is not educationally sound. So I guess my experiences, especially around the lack of nurturing and the few negative interactions with teachers who never saw me as a person, I think it made me more attuned to student’s social and emotional needs and less about the academics, which I think comes second to the social and emotional pieces.

Despite the lack of family support and an educational experience with indifferent teachers, Linda graduated in the top ten percent of her class and was offered a scholarship. Her opportunities and experiences informed many of her beliefs about education, learning, and outcomes for students.

**Important Influences on Identity and Career Choice**

The influence of career choice and identity based on school experiences elicited powerful stories on the participants’ life journeys. An example is Principal Bob XXX’s influence on the educational and life outcomes for Tom: “Bob XXX was a principal who had…who I believe believed in me and wanted to see me do better. So he’d pull me in.” Bob involved Tom and his friend, who also had a difficult home life, in studying computers, because the first computer had arrived in their school and nobody knew how to use it. Bob asked this participant to learn the computer and then teach teachers and students how to use it:

So that’s what we did. So that was the turning point for me in education…after third
grade, I completely turned it around and really enjoyed going to school, looked forward to going to school. It took one person, you know, who believed in you, who was an administrator.

Additionally, family, and specifically his mother, occupied an essential place in Tom’s life and helped him to stay in the right direction: “My mom was at home every day after school. She wasn’t out…you know, my mom was the steady force in my life more than anything else”. Another major influence on Tom’s life was a Christian summer camp that created a normalizing environment for him to reflect on his life, behavior, and attitudes, and the combination of religion and strong discipline served as a turning point for him to understand that antisocial behavior was not going to allow him to lead a positive life. Due to the influences of a parent and committed educators, Tom was able to transform negative school experiences into a positive experience that informed his career choices. Reflecting on how he used his experiences in his role as superintendent, he offered a hypothetical scenario to his staff during training: He described the behavior pattern of a problematic student which, in actuality, was a description of the behaviors he exhibited in school. He asked them what they would do with such a child:

So I had an entire staff of 550 people. People raising hands, taking their questions or their comments, saying, ‘Well, that kid should never have been in a public school. He belonged out.’ ‘His parents didn’t…whatever…bad role modeling at home.’ Whatever the number of responses were. And I said, ‘Well, thank goodness I had people who believed in me, because I wouldn’t be standing in front of you today.’ The room was silent…So for them, it was a powerful reflection tool as well, saying, ‘Geez, I better not give up on somebody or just out place them.

This account showed that Tom not only managed to overcome the negative circumstances
of his life, but also developed his distinct humane and empathetic attitude to challenging students who should be supported, not abandoned. Obviously, such life experiences propelled this participant to think outside of the box. By promoting creative curricular conventions aimed at diverse learners and challenging personnel to structure an educational environment aimed at meeting the needs of all learners, he uses his life experiences to try to meet the needs of all students.

Using her independent voice and determination, Susan found that self-reliance was an essential life skill. She channeled her interpersonal skills to make independent choices and to move through life without a dependence on others. She recalled, “Other than my dad sitting down with us doing homework or looking at something, it was basically…in high school it was like you’re on your own. In high school you’ve got to do your thing.” She shared a strong emphasis on reciprocal, interactive education instead of passively receiving information: “So it was like engaging you in this conversation, which I really liked: to be engaged in the conversation, not just be told take notes and pass a test, which was primarily what it was.”

Susan developed a very strong, highly individual position regarding how education should be provided and holds strong beliefs on the role of teachers and learners in the educational process. In reviewing her life experience, this participant developed a progressive and reflective approach to decision making. She advocates for an interactive, learner-centered education—which was not reflective of her experiences but informed by them. Susan has a distinct position regarding each person’s personal responsibility for performance, which may presumably serve as a rationale for groupings to let each student develop at his or her own pace.

Linda had to overcome many socio-economic and family challenges on her way to education that definitely shaped her identity. Being urged to work early in her life made her
mature earlier than other students:

I started working when I was sixteen…I worked at least twenty hours a week, mostly likely in college forty hours a week, while I was in college, and so I started babysitting when I was young and I started paying room and board to my parents to help them out when I was quite young.

Having to take on responsibility for herself, her parents, and her siblings informed the evolution of Linda’s many character traits and beliefs. Her experiences enabled her to become empathetic toward other students. Her self-taught nature and gravitation to reading as a powerful source of education formed her positive attitude to explore the diverse strategies needed to inform instructional and educational methods: “I think it made me recognize that there are different pathways that students can take to be successful, and asking everybody to do the same thing at the same time just doesn’t seem to be educationally sound.”

Linda also noted that she managed to gain an advantage from her family circumstances and challenging family background for formulating her strong, person-centered vision of education, which is based on respect for the individuality of students, rather than the pursuit of conformity:

So I guess my experiences, particularly around the lack of nurturing and the few negative interactions I had with teachers who never saw me as a person. I never felt they saw me as a person. I think that has made me more attuned to students’ social and emotional needs, and less concerned about the academics, which I think comes second to the social and emotional piece.

Reflecting on what made her a better educator she offered:

I had the [home and school experiences], which were, now that I look back, were
excessive. They really formed me into a person who felt capable and competent to be able to tackle things and to be able to speak up when I needed to; even though I would rather die a thousand deaths than speak to people I did not know in certain times of my life. So I think it made me more confident. Adversity, having to take responsibility…I think has made me more empathetic toward students and the fact that I was self-taught in reading. I think it made me recognize that there are different pathways that students can take to be successful, and asking everybody to do the same thing at the same time just doesn’t seem to be educationally sound.

Personal and school experiences shaped Linda’s perceptions about the importance of each student’s individual approaches and modes of learning, which affected her approach to her beliefs about grouping and ability tracking. Educational institutions must honor and acknowledge the range of learners and the experiences they have before entering school. To effectively educate all students, school personnel must understand the student experience and adjust their practices to assure positive outcomes for all.

**Experiences of Grouping/Tracking in K-12 Education**

All participants reported recollections and experiences regarding grouping during their K-12 education. Susan did not report any grouping, only noting that she witnessed strong rigidity in class and social structures in the school environment. Having attended parochial school, Susan reported that it was important in school to make a name for oneself, especially if one was not a strong student. She reported,

I was able to straddle different social groups and move that way. You know, I learned to keep some really bright people around me. I learned to use people to, you know, can you look at this? Can you do this?
Linda recollected an unexpected test in that sixth grade that would determine the further academic placement of students. She recalled,

Based on this one test in sixth grade, which no one told me to prepare for, which given my family situation, whether I’d been fed or had sleep or anything… I don’t know. I got lucky. I did well on it, and then was able to go into junior high with that high score and was placed in advanced classes.

Tom recollected that there was some formal grouping in programs. Students not engaged in school were sent to vocational programs:

We had a vocational school in XXX. But that was really… as they were conceived at that time, basically your dropouts kids who were going to be dropping out of school, who weren’t going to go on to college. Kids who really wanted to be in a trade or who just were not into school. It was kind of a dumping ground, honestly. And I know that has now changed, but that was the mentality.

Tom stated that he did not recall any AP classes or IEPs existed during his educational experiences in school. He said, “I know there was definitely tiered-like science classes, for example. I remember myself not being very good at math or science. But in English, I was strong. But I do not remember any AP classes.”

Eric suggested that there was some grouping during elementary grades:

I remember from first grade through third grade, you basically had the same kids in class. I really do think that we were grouped in two different groups. A higher group and a lower group. Then in fourth grade, all of a sudden, there’s this big mixture, everybody’s, everybody’s shifted.

Moreover, he suggested that academic grouping was present: by recollecting one
teacher’s proficiency and skill in mixing students so that they constantly worked in new groups. Eric explained the structure in his school:

> When I think about tracking, there was, there was sorting academically. It happened, it just felt natural at the time, but I remember that fourth and fifth grade experience was different, and there was a very positive integration of kids with lots of different skills. It was probably influenced by social growth more than anything during that time.

Overall, as one can see, Eric had a positive experience with student sorting, because it was executed naturally and students mostly did not comprehend it as something strange.

However, he still pointed out that throughout his professional career, he has never been a strong advocate of grouping, especially after examining Oakes’ research. Linda also reflected on the experiences of the stratification that occurred in her educational experiences. She recalled,

> There were eight or nine levels of tracking, and so I was with the same 25 kids for almost all my classes in seventh, eighth, and ninth grade…essentially, from the time I was in seventh grade, I was with the same very small group of kids because it was heavily tracked and there wasn’t a lot of tracking interrupt.

All participants reported that they experienced the stratification of students by ability in their K-12 school experience. While they all reported experiencing this practice, they seemed to indicate that this was part of the cultural milieu of education, and the focus on the individual child was not a priority when they were in school.

**Participants’ Higher Education Experiences**

Participants in this study reported varied college experiences and shared their strategies for decision making, learning, earning a degree, and the path to earning academic credentials.

Eric enrolled in the University of YYY. As he explained, his strategies for success were as
follows:

I taught myself how to be a good student. I created study plans and developed relationships with other kids to work in groups so that there were always study groups, because I’m not a math/science kind of guy…Learning strategies like that, not to rely exclusively on yourself.

Tom made the decision to pursue higher education because of his passion for music. He attended XXX University. He recollected,

Music was something that I was passionate, about so I applied for…I know I wanted to go to XXX University. I loved the idea of going to the city, and so I arranged to apply to XXX University. Actually, it’s the only school I applied to and then made the trip and I did the audition and so that was the only school I applied to and was able to get an early decision.

For Susan, however, higher education was a challenge. As she characterized herself, “I was not a stellar student.” Her father’s influence, however, was impactful, both on her as a person and on her career, due to his connections in the field. As she struggled as a learner and was not interested in education, she reported that what helped her to establish social connections and helped her with technology was her gamer experience. She reported that she was strongly drawn to the Atari game, and later, Colecovision. She became interested in computers and even mentored people on gaming. She took her passion for computers and enrolled in college and majored in elementary education, with concentrations in science and technology. Afterward, she followed the advice of her father and enrolled in a masters degree program at XXX University, an experimental program that cost very little, but which gave her an essential qualification and credential: a concentration in curriculum instruction, with a specialization in computers.
Linda focused on her education at BBB University. As a merit scholar, she received a lot of information from colleges, but selected BBB University because it provided her with a scholarship. Unfortunately, Linda reported a lack of parental interest and it was up to her to negotiate the application process. Her complicated childhood and challenges in getting basic secondary education might have played a role in her attitude toward college. She focused exclusively on academics and work:

My experience at college was I didn’t get involved in a single club or organization. I didn’t attend any sporting events or any social activities. I commuted. I worked nearly full time. I went to my classes, and it was so focused on graduating. So on reflection, that’s a terrible way to go to college.

The educational rigor and work ethic with which Linda embarked on her studies enabled her to complete a degree in three years. Working at a preparatory school focused her on seeking a career in education, and she obtained a degree in English education.

**Perceived Influences on Career Choices**

Each of the participants had some influences that they connected with their decision to pursue a career in education. The experiences included internships, community work, or student teaching opportunities. Eric was strongly influenced by his study abroad program in England, where he was inspired by one of professors. He said,

Probably fifteen to twenty of us who went with one professor who was an elementary math teaching professor, and we went to XXX University in England, where spent the better part of a month there. And I think the connection with that professor, with all of the other kids who were pursuing their careers in education and the experiences that we had in those schools, because the whole time we were there.
He also spoke of the impact of the student teaching experience in XXX, which was across the country. He worked in the fifth grade at first, and then in the seventh and eighth grades, which he really enjoyed and which, in his opinion, affected his decision to become a middle school educator. However, Eric was also positive about his family and teaching staff’s contributions to that decision. As he put it,

"Teachers from kindergarten all the way through 12th grade were much more like family than they were teachers and professionals separate from my family…there were several people…who I could pinpoint and say, ‘She was influential in helping me make the choice to go to college and also to choose education.’"

Tom acknowledged the positive impact of psychology classes, especially child psychology, which helped him to understand child growth and development and informed his specific pedagogical approach. Additionally, this participant was more specific about his focus on secondary education because he found elementary classes interesting, but repetitive.

For Susan, choosing education carried a certain symbolic meaning of finding a place in which she would be comfortable and a job she would enjoy. As she recollected on one science class discussion, a teacher urged her to change her career choice in favor of nursing. She responded, “Sister, I don’t do vomit and I don’t do urine. I like chalk dust,” and walked out. For this participant, a significant value was to know what she was doing and what she liked to do: “In a school, in a classroom I feel alive.” Therefore, as she explained, while her family wanted her to pursue science, she made the decision to pursue a career in education. Tom, on the contrary, shared his initial unwillingness to teach. As he explained,

"It was never so much that I wanted to teach, but I knew that I wanted something with music and I knew something in that field…I didn’t want to teach privately entirely, so I
pursued the music education path, figuring I could still perform as much as my schedule
would allow, but also could have a job that would pay the bills.

Susan reported enjoying teaching from the earliest student teaching assignments. As she
stated, her first student teaching period was in Grades Two and Three. She found it very
interesting, and it was where she saw the first “seeds of leadership” developing in her character.
The second part of her student teaching took place in an elementary education classroom, where
she encountered several children experiencing problems with reading: “There was at least five
boys who could not read in Grade Six. And they literally just pushed them through.” Her
experience provided a strong impetus for her to start her own research on why that happened,
why education failed to meet the needs of those students, and how she could change that.

For Linda, student teaching highlighted the gaps in knowledge that she had to narrow to
become a highly-qualified educator. For her, student teaching offered both learning and teaching
experiences that were valuable and helpful for her educational career:

I really enjoyed working with the students, especially after class, to help the ones who
were struggling. I enjoyed reading students’ writing and conferencing with them. I
enjoyed talking about books with them. What I didn’t enjoy is there were certain gaps in
my education. I had to teach them what a gerund was and I didn’t even know what a
gerund was and things like that. There are certain things that you’re expected to teach as
an English teacher and there were sort of holes in my repertoire. But I really did like it.

All participants were engaged in community work, which also impacted their desire to
work in education. Eric worked for some time with a disabled person and appreciated that
experience very much,

I became a big brother, part of the Big Brother program and having that connection…the
boy was handicapped and in a wheelchair. But it was a learning experience for me, because I had never really dealt with disabilities in any personal way. So that experience was a great experience.

Susan’s experience with the disabled informed her beliefs about the abilities of all individuals. She worked as a caregiver for a disabled person named Rick Hoyt, who gained media attention for his participation in the Boston Marathon. Susan reported that her work with the Hoyt’s made her realize that there were no limits to what an individual could accomplish. She reflected that the hard work she did with the Hoyt family and their commitment to having Rick included really changed her outlook and perceptions on individuals with disabilities. Tom shared a warm memory of putting together a musical ensemble for persons who are blind. These experiences informed some of the beliefs and attitudes that these individuals developed over time and that would impact their decision making.

**The Superintendency and Decision making**

While the participants were engaged in teaching careers, they had opportunities to participate in further professional development and explore other career pathways. Eric became interested in leadership and accepted a position as an assistant principal in a MA school: “In my fourth year at XXX school, I think I got tired of doing the principal’s job without getting the principal’s salary.” In his role, he noted that the principal was disengaged with the work at school, and he had assumed the role of being an engaged problem solver. He noted, That particular school had a void of leadership with the principal. He was the weatherman with the XXX Observatory and he spent the majority of his days, when he was at school, dealing with weather issues...while he would never admit it, I was given more principal responsibilities than assistant principal responsibilities.
His first assignment charged him with developing the school schedule. He was left alone with the task, while all teachers and the principal left for a vacation. Nevertheless, he coped with the task and arranged a flawless schedule, with heterogeneous grouping in place. As he shared his thoughts, “I was cocky enough to think, ‘I can influence other people in other schools, so why don’t I become an administrator?’” Moreover, as he added, doing the principal’s job well and not getting a reward for that was what prompted him to search career advancement: “What prompted me to become…I think it was doing XXX’s work and not being paid for it. I thought I was ready to lead a school of my own and I wanted the opportunity.” Therefore, he applied for a principalship, obtained it, and was successful in the role.

For Susan, her decision to enter the field of educational administration was a very influential step because it enabled her to make a difference for children who had negative school experiences. She reported, “Going into school administration made me a better teacher. I learned things I had never learned before, and most of it was due to courses from Research for Better Teaching.” Susan learned how to be a good administrator from watching unsuccessful administrators that ran schools she worked in. She recalled,

My first year, first year as VP, I’m in a building that’s sick. I got a guy who is sexually harassing people…who is abusive, verbally abusive to students. I’ve got a principal who is in his office who is asleep on the couch and his secretary who protects him. So I basically ran the building.

Linda received external influence to promote a career in administration when her leadership and managerial skills were noticed by others outside the school district. She reported,

My natural bossy side came out and I was Chairing a NEASC self-study
committee for the school, and then I went on my first NEASC visit as part of the visiting team and the chair of the visiting team. Towards the end of the visit, tapped me on the shoulder and said, ‘Have you ever thought about going into administration? I think you’d be really good at it.’ I said, ‘Oh hadn’t thought about that.’ This was seven years into teaching, or six, and so I decided to go to graduate school again…and got a CAGS in educational administration.

Linda found a vacancy for the position of an assistant principal, even before getting the CAGS leadership certificate. She was hired; but upon getting that job, she found out that the school was totally dysfunctional, with underperforming students, an absentee principal and resource challenges to solve. After a couple of years of working in that struggling school, Linda made a decision to move to another city in Massachusetts and obtained the position of principal in a suburban school. As she clarified her rationale, “So I felt ready to take that on. I had high academic expectations for students, and I had a vision to make sure all students had educational opportunities, the best teachers, and positive school experiences.”

Tom reflected that he started applying for a principal position too quickly and cited not having enough experience to obtain the positions for which he applied. He found that he lacked experience teaching a general education curriculum because he was a music teacher. When he interviewed for positions, he did not have the foundational skills to answer questions about a balanced math program. He set his sights on learning what he did not know and was appointed as an assistant to the principal in a local elementary school, which he assessed as being very helpful: “So that was a good opportunity for me, stepping into the administrative role and learning. I learned the most that I learned as an administrator working in that role.” He enjoyed working under the guidance of his principal, from whom he learned a great deal. He succeeded
him in the role of principal. As participants transitioned into administrative roles, their ability to make educational decisions and establish policies was cemented. Using their experiences to impact educational practices enabled them to influence programs and opportunities for students.

For all participants, the path to the superintendency presented challenges and opportunities. Susan provided a detailed account of her work as a curriculum director in a district where she was limited in her career opportunities because of gender politics. She repeatedly faced unequal treatment from hiring committees making recruitment decisions. This participant reported applying for superintendent positions for three months and attending more than a dozen of interviews, but always losing in the final round to male candidates. After one rejection, she was told that her age, gender, and family were considered a barrier to getting a superintendency because family matters would interfere with her duties.

Susan decided to pursue a doctoral degree to become more competitive in the field. Receiving a certification for a superintendent position and completing the dissertation was also a challenging process for this participant: She experienced academic and family pressures during her studies in a highly regarded program, and she had to defend her views about equality and equity issues with some of her professors. Even after obtaining a degree and being hired as a superintendent, she faced resistance as she attempted to implement change within the district. She reported, “We were doing professional learning communities and redoing philosophies and core values and things with life skills programs.” She received little support in that workplace: “I got a strategic plan in place…but they refused to set smart goals. They refused. They still don’t.”

Eric also shared some impressions about initial workplace challenges, mostly connected with the inconsistency between his expectations and the political realities of the role. As he
clarified, “It’s not the job that I thought it was. It’s not the opportunity to create a vision. Think about your mission and your vision on a daily basis and how am I going to do the best thing for kids.” He reported challenges in dealing with inequities in the teacher’s contract. He was concerned about differential pay for some high school teachers, which he considered unfair to the teachers. He shared the challenge in implementing change and the resistance from personnel. Tom also agreed that the role of superintendent is less about education and more about politics. The politics of the role makes it difficult for superintendents to navigate through the conflicting needs of various stakeholders and still place quality of education as the highest priority. Tom became a superintendent at a very young age and is not sure how long he will be able to remain in the role, due to the stress and pressures from all stakeholders. He may consider stepping back and accepting a supporting role in an urban district. Reflecting on accepting her first superintendency, Linda recalled not being as selective as she might have been. She said,

> I wish I had chosen more carefully, because the district I chose had many, many challenges. It was under-resourced and was change averse, and so my first couple of years, particularly with a difficult school committee, were challenging, and had I chosen more carefully, the district I went to as superintendent, my first superintendency would have been easier. The politics of the role and the impact on leadership were a challenge to negotiate in the early years.

All participants reflected that their path to the superintendency offered opportunities to learn and grow as educators. They all cited the political realities they faced as they assumed the superintendent role. The political pressures and community expectations often limited their ability to implement change effectively.
Influences and the Role of Superintendent

Each of the participants mentioned individuals or experiences that influenced them and that informed the evolution of their beliefs, attitudes and how they made decisions. Linda recollected her work under the guidance of a mentor in her role as assistant superintendent in XXX district:

Tony XXX...was an incredible mentor for me. I really responded well to him and valued him, and he was a very different in terms of his style, his leadership style, he was very driven by core values. He was a very humble man who had the capacity to use great relationships, and so I had a great role model for really the first time in my career of what a good superintendent looks like and how an effective superintendent can bring out the best in people around him.

Susan recalled that her experience running an alternative school was highly formative in the evolution of her attitudes toward students and her leadership style. She recalled,

I had about 120 at-risk youth from the city...they would come in orange jumpsuits with shackles and handcuffs on...The resource officers in the high schools would come to my building for a break because my kids were in control.

This work was tough, but Susan managed to lead and manage a challenging school where students could have a safe learning environment.

Linda also shared positive memories about the support and influence of XXX College professors who supervised her during her doctoral program. She cited mentors and the vital support from a support group of women superintendents who created a trustful atmosphere and provide a safe haven in which Linda could share her problems, seek advice, and simply
communicate. Tom appreciated the role of a person who was a principal while he occupied the position of assistant principal:

I’ve never minded being surrounded by people who are older or smarter…DDD was a very dynamic principal. She really inspired me in terms of how you do staff meetings…they’d review those students’ portfolios, talk about strategies or what this child…how they made success, how to replicate those…so it gave me a real feel for PD, budget…plus the leadership of meetings, and so that was really a great experience.

Moreover, Tom acknowledged that his experience of behaving badly at school and the support from the principal shaped his vision that every child can be successful. He brought that vision into his superintendency by persuading staff to invest in children, take ownership of what they were doing, and play a role in students’ destinies.

In addition to the cited influences on their professional views and career, participants acknowledged theoretical influences as well. For instance, Eric credited the work of Sergiovanni, Deal, Oakes, and Dweck as influential writers and theorists who affected his ideas about transformational change, intelligence, and heterogeneous grouping. Tom spoke more about managerial roles and political literature, such as Collins’s *From Good to Great* and Kingdon’s writings on agenda setting in politics. Linda praised Marzano’s works on classroom assessment and grading and Reeves on standards-based teaching.

These individuals not only report being influenced by mentors and peers, but they also cited the impact of reading current research and need for continued professional development and continuing to learn and change. As reflective practitioners, they all cited examples of how their practice is informed by other influences.

**Perceptions about Role of Superintendent**
After becoming superintendents, each of the participants perceives his or her role as a decision-maker and policy-setter in the school and community. Recollections and experiences for this study reveal insights into how they make decisions and how their beliefs and attitudes inform decision making. Tom pointed out his passion for preservation of the arts programs for the past nine years. His advocacy helped to minimize budgetary cuts, so that arts programming remained a core program in the district. Moreover, he considers one of his primary achievements to be within the field of changing the attitude of the educational system to support student behaviors: “I’m most pleased…that we spent time looking at student behaviors and trying to figure out why…We made changes to benefit students and to think about student needs.”

Tom also saw his role in changing the way education perceives students. Given that he was a problematic student who changed because one person believed in him, he decided to make an effort and make a difference for other students: “I think the opportunity to influence outcomes for students and create connections for kids and adults was very motivating for me.” Moreover, this participant’s position also related to team building and fostering team development. His purpose was to build a dynamic team of leaders who are skilled and passionate about students, who are able to lead and manage, and who can represent the school department professionally. As he pointed out, “It’s amazing how having the wrong administrator…can really just disrupt the entire flow.” Tom perceives his superintendent role from a variety of perspectives, especially from a human resources view: building a team can give children the education they deserve.

Eric reported making inclusive decisions that are student-centered. He cited one example in which he addressed concerns about the structure of the high school schedule and how it can be altered to more effectively support students to reduce stress. He described the implementation of
the XXX Block, a period that was built into the high school schedule to offer a respite to students. His district is highly performing, with respect to academics and students who are involved in academics, music, art, and many other activities. The community and students have high expectations, and educational outcomes are competitive. The XXX Block is a designated daily time when students can connect with adults on a personnel level, without the pressure of academics. Using decision making that is inclusive, Eric said: “What I try to espouse are decisions that will be implemented in schools, should include people who are closest to the situation.”

Susan perceives herself more as a policymaker and negotiator. She knows that politics drive much of the work in the school superintendency, so she perceives her work as balancing the competing interests in an effort to achieve consensus. Managing the budget process is one example she cited. She shared her experience of negotiating a budget reduction that pitted academic advocates against supporters of the athletic program. During the process, she applied her political skills to enable stakeholders to adopt a global, rather than an agenda-driven view of educational needs. However, at the same time, she indicated her strong practical side of being involved in the educational process at all levels: “My principals run their buildings. We talk about things…it’s very collaborative…I go in the classrooms…I don’t step in on principals’ toes, but if they make a decision and I’ll say let’s process this together…Be prepared.” Hence, it is evident that Susan perceives her role’s multi-dimensionality and does not lead from a top down perspective. Rather, she involves all stakeholders. Susan shared a detailed account of how she managed to establish herself as a superintendent and how she assumed administrative duties: “Through leadership, I was able to build trust and some credibility. Also, I learned to navigate the politics of the community. I assessed who the influencers were in the community and I
enlisted them as allies."

Linda discussed the importance of building consensus in the community and gathering support from all stakeholders. In reflecting on policy success she recalled, “We had a shared vision and common set of beliefs that students mattered and could be successful. This shared, collective vision was part of the fabric of the belief system of all.”

By using their leadership skills and understanding the politics of consensus, all four participants used strategic approaches to implement change initiatives and lead their districts. All discussed the impact of their beliefs and attitudes on their decision making.

**Attitudes and Beliefs on Intelligence and Learning**

By examining beliefs about grouping or tracking practices and how these attitudes and beliefs are connected to views on intelligence, the participants shared insights, observations, and reflections regarding the nature of intelligence and its effect on learning and performance. Eric commented:

Well I firmly believe that there’s no such thing as a fixed intelligence. I mean we all have the capacity to learn and we learn at different rates, in different ways. So I very much believe that if we are addressing the style, the differentiation, the style that a person benefits and appreciates most in their learning time frame, then they too will learn…If you believe you can do it and you want to work hard, then I believe you can.

Susan also supported this belief by stating that every child can be successful at school, if they are provided with the right amount of time and attention. Moreover, she pointed out that the educational community entrusted with the task to educate their children must make the most of that education. Personal aptitude, likes, and dislikes do not matter, because teachers assume responsibility for educational outcomes for all students. She suggested, “Education can be the
great leveler. It can be the mechanism for people to move forward.”

Similar beliefs were voiced by Linda, who characterized intelligence as not fixed, but malleable and changing. She reported,

One of my core beliefs is that all students can learn, if given appropriate support. They may not all learn at the same pace, but I truly believe that we often underestimate what students can do. And so expanding access, increasing opportunities for applied learning, project based learning, and more technology based courses expands offerings for students who may learn differently. Listening to student interests and trying to meet their interests, all of those sort of structural elements support the philosophy of empowering students to make better choices and challenge themselves to the greatest extent.

Tom described intelligence as malleable and attitude-driven. According to his belief, intelligence is a form of intrinsic motivation that makes people strive to better performance, recognition, doing better than their parents or peers, etc. As he explained it,

Kids aren’t going to jump out of bed in the morning, most of them, to go to school and do math. But they will do math if they know that if they are successful, it’s going to give them a door to a career path they may have interest in.

According to Tom, the way in which intelligence can be maximized among children is “connecting kids with resources to meet their needs.” All participants voiced strong, student-focused, individualized perspectives on promoting student success and recognizing the needs and potential of every student.

**Student-centered Beliefs about Education**

All participants revealed that building a student-centered culture in their schools is a priority. Many of these beliefs were informed by their varied school experiences. As clarified
by Tom, the impact of his elementary school principal was meaningful for him, and he was grateful to the educator for taking time to get to know him and make an effort to change the course of his life. He said,

That’s a message I impart to principals, saying, ‘How are you taking ownership of every single child in your building. How do you know them all? Take the time to know them all.’ And I see that with the leadership team, and I think that’s how we’re moving in the forward direction, because they all care deeply about kids.

Linda recollected the impact of minimal assistance and support from her family as an influence on the development of her beliefs. Their lack of interest in her education and her success contributed to her personal desire to succeed. She developed her student-centered philosophy on education as follows: “I guess through my career I have tried to connect to students, teachers, and colleagues to help them realize their potential. I have tried to make decisions that help all students acquire what they need.” In addition, she pointed out the need to understand the reasons for resistance to change, from the perspectives of both teachers and learners, to be able to introduce innovations effectively. She confessed that acting always in the best interest of children can, in fact, be challenging and requires communication and negotiation with stakeholders. She recalled how she worked in one district to drive change: She implemented a change to eliminate the lowest academic track. Over time, the initiative resulted in an increase in the number of students enrolled in AP classes. She said, “It was an accomplishment that was centered on students’ needs…we wanted all students to have access to exceptional instruction and to offer the most rigorous curriculum for all. We made the change and both the faculty and students responded.”

Susan also expressed how her school experiences informed the evolution of her beliefs
about students. She stated,

You have to do the hard work and you have to battle for those kids. I think what I…the thing that really influences it and is, is my own children…I want to be in a district that I can make to the point where my children would have gotten an exceptional education and it’s the education that I would want for my kid, is what we need to deliver to those kids every day. The education I wish I had had. The opportunities I wish I could have had.

All the participants were driven to implement and oversee programs to ensure that all students have equitable access to programs and opportunities to achieve outcomes. However, Eric articulated another component necessary for successful achievement of student-centered education: “Strategic planning and goal setting” are also an integral part of superintendents’ work. Without a vision, goals, resources, and stakeholder buy-in, any change initiative will fail.

**Attitudes that Foster Equity in Education**

The goal to implement student-centered educational programs was common among all the participants, and their educational agenda focuses on issues of equity and access and the relationship to educational decision making. All participants described policies, practices and decision making aimed at offering equal access to educational resources for representatives of all classes and races—and specifically for children with disabilities—through inclusive education. These issues are significant in the educational agenda, and the participants offered their views and experiences on equity, with respect to the structure of schools. Linda clarified her position:

… some students come to school with the right DNA from affluent families, access to preschool, books…and those students have advantages that many other students do not have. It is not a question of IQ, but about the impact of the environment and the access to opportunities. Schools level the playing field, so it is incumbent on leaders to make sure
students without the requisite DNA have the chance to obtain it. Reinforcing structures that keep kids out of rigorous curriculum is ineffective leadership and a sign of a culture that does not center on the needs of students.

Susan holds a position that, while inequalities exist in life, they should not be perpetuated through education. Education may become the first and only setting for equal access to resources that gives students equal opportunities for development and further career advancement. She suggested, “Every kid can be successful, if given the right instruction and the right amount of time…You know, they can all learn, and so we have to create the right environment for kids to be successful, and you do whatever it takes.”

Tom shared his personal experience in integrating students whose primary language was not English. In order to meet the needs of students, Tom developed a school within a school to let students pass the MCAS test and gain enough credits for obtaining a diploma. He sought to understand this underserved population in his district and took the time and allocated resources to meet the needs of these students, so that they were able to access a quality school program, despite the challenges of language, experience, and poverty.

Susan shared an experience of removing prerequisites for students seeking to enter AP classes. While still a work in progress, it has offered access for students with learning disabilities and students who are noted as coming from high poverty situations. These students may not have the requisite credentials on paper, but by being offered access to a more rigorous curriculum they are offered the resources and opportunity to access higher level academic programs. The hurdle that presents the most challenge to this initiative is the teacher’s lack of knowledge and practical skills on how to differentiate instruction effectively. She proposed to “…move to more fluid educational structures that meet the needs of all students.”
Tom also shared a success story on how he implemented a vocational program that provided a more diverse student population with career focused practical skills in the field of hospitality. As he characterized it as follows:

When they leave the high school, they’ll have a high school diploma and they’ll have a license from the American Hotel Lodging Association. They’ll have this certification from the Double Tree by Hilton, and they’ll have all the certifications by Marriot, so when they leave, they have all those certifications, whether they choose to go into hospitality as an industry or not…So it’s about offering creative options for kids, and I think you need that in this community.

The efforts of these school leaders, as they endeavor to offer equitable and varied opportunities for all students, can result in increased achievement outcomes for all students.

**Innovation and Transformative Change**

Each of the participants offered stories about how they improved practice in schools and used their roles to drive change and innovation. Eric performed the functions of a principal while being formally employed as assistant principal for four years in XXX district. A lack of participation by his supervisor gave him considerable freedom to implement change and innovation in his school. The most essential change he targeted was changing the attitudes of teachers and their responses to students who were acting out behaviorally. He stated,

I would say changing the culture from ‘kick this kid out of my class because he’s not or she’s not behaving well’ to ‘let’s think about what this kid’s not getting that is causing this problem’…Before I left there after four years, I would say that there were far fewer kids sent to the office…it wasn’t just because teachers were tolerating more. It’s because teachers were asking questions and trying to meet the kids’ needs more.
Linda was also an innovator in her educational career: As a change agent, she did much to improve the curriculum in her school:

One of the things I did as a teacher was to start an interdisciplinary humanities program with a social studies teacher, and I carried that on into my role as assistant principal and then I brought the same program into XXX HS…I was able to bring in an integrated math program that really worked well for all students that resulted in less tracking because it was more flexible, and we did a major building project while I was there, which thinking about how space is used most effectively and being part of the process really influenced kind of my thinking as an administrator.

Another influence on Linda was her work with the METCO program, a program that transported African American children to a more affluent suburban school. The METCO Program (Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunities was founded in 1966. It is a voluntary integration program that offers a suburban public education for African-American, Hispanic and Asian students who reside in Boston. She noted significant achievement gaps between the student groups, based on race. She was compelled to act, so she conducted research and identified the students that were under-performing. She worked to bolster programs and led a public discussion that promoted a change in the program and led change so that the program more effectively served the needs of children. She said,

We talked about giving kids what they need and not just giving them the same, and so that influenced me as an educator…We did make changes, and the impact for students was profound, so I am proud of our work to improve outcomes for students.

**Efforts Related to Implementation of Inclusion and Heterogeneous Grouping**

Eric and Linda both shared experiences from their districts that focused on introducing
initiatives aimed at heterogeneous grouping. The path was challenging and necessitated the need to confront belief systems and attitudes within the school community. As Linda explained,

There was no technology and there was no written curriculum, but we had some teachers who were really pretty dedicated to the students and open to new ideas. So we started this interdisciplinary, heterogeneously grouped program for ninth and tenth graders that was modeled after a middle school model, where a team of teachers…do flexible grouping…to meet the student needs.

Linda reported that while her assistant superintendent was conservative, he supported the idea and found grant money to finance that change. The participant took a team of teachers to New York to learn curriculum mapping from Heidi Hayes Jacobs and travelled to Kansas City to learn about interdisciplinary high school teams. Through research based interventions, they designed effective programs for students.

Eric voiced a negative attitude toward grouping practices by noting, “With grouping, the philosophy of how to organize students is not about the needs of students but about the needs of adults.” He shared his experience as a middle school teacher, and how and a colleague introduced heterogeneous grouping. In his school, there were eight blue and eight red classes: the former were considered elite and the latter encompassed everyone else. Many teachers of both classes were against the change initially, because they needed to adjust their work to differentiate instruction. After seeing the success of “8 Blue the 8 Red,” teachers understood that all benefitted from the change. They received an opportunity to work with successful, high-performing students and could make them positive role models for the rest of the class. This ultimately affected performance positively.

Susan also had an experience with inclusion: Since she was engaged with special
education at the beginning of her career, she managed to promote the initiative of inclusion in one of the schools where she was employed. While not all teachers supported the initiative, she still collaborated with one of them, which was a success:

I worked with a lot of organizations, planning, and a lot of management. And so I had this group of kids and I had the speech and language pathologist was in my room with me. So I was the regular ED position…we used to have people from the University of Massachusetts coming down to watch.

Speaking about her inclusion initiatives, Susan pointed out, “I just thought it was good for the kids,” and confided that she based her judgment on her personal experience with exclusion from the mainstream because of her dysgraphia. She wanted equal treatment for all of her students. Her creative approach worked really well on a heterogeneous grouping of students from different reading levels because she used novels, rather than basal readers. She also used theatre, which further contributed to creating an inclusive and engaging environment for students.

The inclusion of students with special needs and learning disabilities into the educational environment challenges educators, but it offers an opportunity to expand inclusive opportunities and access to all students. Participants shared their experiences with special programs they implemented within the educational establishment that were aimed at keeping students in the school district and educated in their high schools. Susan reported having developed two programs, Pathways and Networks, to meet the diverse needs of students with significant emotional disabilities. As Susan explained,

We have a Pathways Programs and…[a] Networks Program, and most of the kids in those programs don’t go into inclusion very often. One, Networks is for kids who are
coming out of hospital placements, and I’m shocked at the number of children who need that kind of transitional programming. On any given time during the school year, there will be eight to ten kids in the class, where they have just come from a residential hospital placement, and they’re transitioning into mainstream.

While the students are not included, they have the opportunity to attend school in their local high school and be engaged in the social aspects of the school. Tom also shared his experiences in program development. Students with Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE) is a program aimed at students who enter high school with limited or no formal education. As he reported, trying to educate this population of students without a special program would result in higher dropout rates. By hosting this program and delivering services in an innovative manner, educators can support students as they attend their local high school where they can access athletics, the arts and clubs, and also have their unique educational needs met within the community. He described the special educational challenges that need to be addressed. In sharing stories about what this population of students require he said,

…that requires a different skillset because, unlike a student coming in at the elementary level, these students coming in at the high school level still have to be able to take MCAS and graduate before they are too old to be in high school.

Meeting the needs of such students involves hiring additional English Language Learning (ELL) staff and training teachers to meet the needs of those students. Tom also acknowledged that they do their best to individualize education for each student. Another solution they found for addressing the needs of students for placement is to create connections with various industries to send students on internships so that they acquire hands-on experience and gain
better chances for employment.

The data collected from these narrative interviews illustrate how the lives and educational experiences of participants informed and influenced the evolution of their social identities and the development of their beliefs and attitudes about education and learning. Additionally, the stories illustrate how the attitudes and beliefs of these four school superintendents impacted and informed their educational decision making about educational practices, with respect to the structures of secondary education within their school districts.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The attitudes and perceptions of educators can shape educational policies and programs that impact students. Educational administrators such as superintendents influence district policies and have the opportunity to develop programs to meet the diverse needs of students. Kulik and Kulik (1982) found that students with varied academic ability benefitted when instruction was directed at levels that aligned with ability.

Although the practice of tracking is evidenced in schools, these practices have negative economic, political, and social impacts on student outcomes. School based policies and practices may serve to widen achievement gaps and limit educational access and opportunities (Oakes, 1990). Tracking perpetuates the culture of inequality and poverty as disadvantaged students are more often represented in lower tracks, where they are more likely to access a less rigorous curriculum with less qualified teachers. This limits their access to higher education, as well as better paying jobs (Ansalone, 2004). The negative outcomes for some populations of students seem to necessitate a systemic change in philosophy and practice. It is suggested that if this change is to be effective, it must be propelled by the leadership within a district.

The attitudes and beliefs of a school superintendent may impact how the leader makes decisions on the implementation of policies and practices, with respect to tracking and ability grouping. The beliefs, attitudes and perceptions that inform the social identity of school leaders offer insights into how identity informs educational decision making. As a result of this research, social identity and beliefs influence some decision making about educational programming. From their life experiences and stories, a narrative emerged to illustrate themes that could inform initiatives that may positively impact students and result in policy changes within a district.
The superintendent’s demographic characteristics play a significant role in their beliefs and decision making, when it comes to student intelligence and tracking. Research by Anderson, Greene, and Loewen (1988) showed that female educators reported higher degrees of self-efficacy, which may translate to a more positive perception of the students’ intelligence and capacity to learn. When examining the experiences of Susan and Linda, the role of gender was a factor in how they made sense of their experiences. Susan reported she felt gender was a factor that hindered her job opportunities and was a factor in her doctoral program. She felt her opportunities were more limited due to her gender and disabilities. She consistently cited that she relies on these experiences as she looks to develop programs for students. She is mindful of the challenges she faced. Linda also cited gender as a factor that influences her decision making in her current role as superintendent. Mindful of the politics that impact her role she relies on support from colleagues who are female as a support as she negotiates the challenges of the job.

In the stories shared in this study, all four participants cited how their family backgrounds and educational experiences informed the development of their beliefs and attitudes toward education and learning.

As the present study’s findings showed, each of the participants reported on family background experiences and the individual educational and work-related experiences on their way to the superintendency that shaped their perceptions about learning, tracking, educational structures, and the influences on their decision making. Some of their experiences as students, including both positive and negative classroom experiences, informed their beliefs about the value of advocating for student-centered educational programs. Additionally, they were all driven to help students avoid the challenges that they experienced in their educational journey. Career challenges have also affected several participants, in terms of their approaches to
innovation, collaboration with teaching staff, and shaping their schools’ organizational and educational culture. Participants’ agency, based on their specific social background, family, and social identities, notably shaped their current perceptions, beliefs, and practices and also drove how they made decisions in the educational environment. Their reflections align with research by Spillane and Thompson (1997), Ansalone and Biafora (2004; 2008; 2010), and Blau and Duncan (1967) about the importance of the social identity of educational policy-makers in shaping their decisions and actions on educational reforms and processes.

Eric’s educational experiences and family background were the most traditional: He came from an intact family and a middle class social structure. His education was described as caring, and he cited fond memories of supportive teachers and a rigorous curriculum. In his recollections, he indicated that he came from a well-to-do family and lived in a small town where teachers from the kindergarten and school were more like a family than teaching staff. Such an intimate, family-like atmosphere in his small town, coupled with the high expectations for education set by his family demonstrated that Eric was a typical student who had little difficulty navigating the educational milieu. He repeatedly pointed out that teachers acted more as scaffolders for him and other students, rather than trying to catch or criticize them. Moreover, he never faced any explicit tracking of his performance in his class—though he suspected he was assigned to a specific class for “high flyers.” It is evident that these positive experiences with school impacted how this participant views education for students, is centered on students, and cares for each individual student. This positive example of a supportive culture based on collaboration and respect has shaped the educational values that Eric has internalized to drive his educational practice.

However, an analysis of Eric’s social identity and its influences would be incomplete
without considering that his primary motivation for seeking a superintendency was primarily financial. As he confessed several times during the interview, he was guided to administrative work and further career advancement by the promise of better compensation. He appeared disenchanted with the nature of the superintendent’s work because, in his understanding, it did not give him as much transformative power and influence as many perceive. The politics of the role necessitate making decisions that, at times, are less about students and more about reaching consensus—especially when working within the confines of a contractual bargaining agreement. It should also be noted that this district is academically high performing with little fiscal challenges. Budgetary resources support a wide range of programs and options for students. There is little diversity within the community and a low poverty rate. The expectation is that most of the students will attend competitive colleges. Therefore, for this participant, the superintendency remains much more about policymaking and control over budgets, staffing, etc., rather than about promoting transformative educational change. Thus, it is evident that, despite holding a clearly defined set of beliefs and attitudes related to equality, inclusion, and tracking, this participant feels limited and unable to consistently introduce transformative change. However, when he was in a position to make change—as he was when he was a teacher and principal—he was effective at persuading stakeholders that student-centered programs aimed at heterogeneous grouping more effectively serve the educational needs of all students. 

Tom’s social identity and the impact on his beliefs and attitudes on tracking, inclusion, and equality in education are profound. His personal life circumstances appear to have had an impact on his decisions and policies as he serves in the position of superintendent. Citing a family structure in which his parent was incarcerated, he openly discussed the impact on his early childhood development. He reacted to this situation by acting out in school. Through the
intervention of a principal, he was supported by an educator who offered him purpose and direction. By engaging him to help deploy computers, he connected with an adult who guided him as a role model and enabled him to see the value of doing well in school. The support from the principal was a very transformative experience for the participant, helping him to renew his interest in studies, discover a passion for music, and graduate from school with the purpose of going to college.

This experience shaped his student-centered approach to education and his strong opposition to the tracking policies that limit opportunities and access for students. Additionally, he reported that in his community, students at risk of dropout or who were not academically successful were sent to a vocational school. This vocational school had negative connotations within the community and served to separate students from the general education curriculum. The perception that some students were treated unequally compared to others resonated at an early age. In his role as superintendent, he was in a position to intercede to offer more equitable opportunities to students who needed an alternative type of education. In the high school in his community, he started a vocational program through which students could engage in internships and exit school with a high school diploma and vocational career credentials that enabled them to obtain gainful employment in the hospitality sector. Additionally, they started a program aimed at an increasingly large population of immigrant students who came to high school with limited academic and language skills. While some of the academics in these programs were in separate classrooms, they were located in the same high school facility, so all the students could be engaged in music, art, athletics, and extracurricular programs. These programs offered academic programs with skills based training and access to an inclusive environment. Hence, his early experiences with labeling and categorizing students may have contributed to Tom’s beliefs and
perceptions about equity, equality, and the inclusion of all students by giving them opportunities for more effective educational programs.

Judging from this participant’s life story, his administrative career was driven by his passion for music. As he confided, he selected a teaching career and further work in administration because of his wish to have the stability that could not be achieved only through musical performance. Hence, it is logical that this passion for music has shaped Tom’s attitude to educational structuring: He advocates for an approach that would allow students to combine academic success and find their specific passion in the arts. Consequently, Tom does his best to provide all students with the resources they need, thus fostering equal access. This does not necessarily mean inclusion. It is also notable, that despite the fact that Tom shared a range of positive and realistic policies and decisions aimed at improving students’ access to educational resources and making educational opportunities available, he has also acknowledged his limited role in the implementation of educational changes and reforms at that position. He discussed that the demands of the role and constraints of politics may lead him to take a step back and accept a lesser role, in order to have more time for his family and children. Moreover, he stated that superintendency is more about politics than about education, and he shared stories about the need to focus on the management of staff and team building within his educational establishment, which he considered a core responsibility of a superintendent. Therefore, one can assume that both Eric and Tom perceive their transformative role and decision making power of affecting educational structure and reform as limited by dealing with politics and management.

The social identity and experiences shared by Susan also played a role in her self-definition and agency in the educational field, as well as in her administrative career. Her family background, educational experiences, and initial work experiences were challenging, as she
faced difficulties in school due to learning disabilities, as well as in the workplace, where she had to confront gender discrimination. These experiences shaped her beliefs about educational structure, process, and reform.

The greatest impact on Susan’s perceptions about grouping, tracking, and equality among students is illustrated by her struggle with the educational system after her dysgraphia was diagnosed. Teachers in the parochial school she attended disregarded her as a child who was not able to learn. Only her parents’ support and her ability to design her own accommodations enabled her to overcome that challenge, graduate successfully, and pursue higher education. Due to her unique learning style, she developed a rebellious behavioral pattern that led to conflicts with teachers. As a result of her insistence on having her individual learning style accommodated, she compelled teachers to respect and take her individual needs into account.

As she moved into a career in education and recalled her own challenges with reading, Susan took an active interest in finding educational approaches for students with educational challenges, so that their individual needs would not limit their access to educational resources. As a teacher who worked with a wide range of students with emotional problems, learning disabilities, and who were living in poverty, she created learning environments in which students could be successful. She often used theater and dance to present the curriculum in a more accessible manner and support students to succeed.

At the core of Susan’s beliefs about tracking, inclusion, and equality was the driving force that she had to fight and struggle for acceptance to be regarded as an educational leader who would be a successful superintendent. She is fully aware of her contribution as an innovator of educational change and her ability to affect that change. Her resiliency and perseverance enable her to be an effective change agent and policymaker whose experience and expertise
allow her to manage the politics of change with a focus on creating more equitable programs for students.

The social identity of Linda is also highly influential in determining her educational and career pathway. She is representative of someone who negotiated the school environment with little support from her family or the school environment. Her perspective is a unique success story. Based on her recollections, she learned early on about the unequal distribution of educational resources and limited access to programs. The evolution of her social identity is an example of how some students can use the system to meet their needs. Being highly intelligent and learning self-reliance, she was determined to have her needs met by the education system. As she reported, she learned to play the game of school well. Through a love of reading and learning, she became an exceptional student. She was required to become a caregiver for her siblings, and she learned perseverance, independence, and self-reliance at an early age. Despite parents who were unengaged and indifferent to her education, Linda managed to graduate in the top ten percent of her class. She did not note any limitations in her access to education, frequently pointing out that personal drive and self-education were what saved her and gave her a competitive edge.

The social identity of Linda within the context of this discussion shows some evidence that tracking and grouping as an educational strategy to classify students was not entirely about academic output but about acquiring a set of school behaviors. As this participant observed, she quickly learned the “game of school,” which meant behaving and never challenging teachers or entering into a conflict with them. She could succeed, if she worked hard and did what was expected of her. She learned what social capital she would need to get along with teachers. While she repeatedly noted that she never considered herself smart or gifted, she quickly sought
to understand the expectations of teachers and altered her manner of behaving so that it reflected what teachers expected. These strategies helped her to be compliant and maintain the perception she was a good student. While she was a strong student she never developed the perception or beliefs that she was intelligent or more capable. She felt some of the behaviors she needed to learn had more to do with gender roles and the expectations teachers had about students. She reflected that she was just better at understanding what teachers wanted and she gave them what they expected.

All participants noted the subjective association of tracking practices and the impact on their expectations about student behavior. They discussed how educator perceptions sometimes drive beliefs about students, even though there is not a link between intelligence, academic aptitude, and behavior. From Linda’s account, one may understand that learning the unspoken rules within the school may help students to achieve—but at a high cost: not all students are equipped to understand or uncover this hidden curriculum within the classroom.

A discussion of social identities of superintendents would be incomplete without recalling the impact of their community service experiences. Many participants’ attitudes toward inclusion were shaped by their personal experiences. Tom, as a participant of the Big Brother program and through his work with starting an orchestra for blind musicians, gained an outlook that allowed him to see abilities in all individuals. Eric’s work as a student teacher in Alaska enabled him to develop a broad cultural view. Additionally, his role as an assistant principal enabled him to develop programs aimed at understanding student behaviors and challenging teachers to see beyond negative behaviors. He challenged teachers in the classroom to look to the reasons behind student non-compliance. Susan’s work in alternative education fostered the need for her to develop a set of skills to integrate students with challenging behavior in inclusive
environments. Linda’s work uncovering achievement gaps between affluent students and the students who were bused into the district caused her to publicize the problem and research solutions. She then sought consensus for change and implemented programs aimed at reducing this achievement gap.

Superintendents comprise a group that may derive their descriptive and evaluative identities or social meanings as defined by perceptions of other groups. As outlined by Hogg (2001), the social identity, as a foundation for educational leadership, relies on the results of interactions between the leader and subordinate stakeholders. As leaders, school superintendents oversee subordinates by goal setting, establishing rewards systems—i.e., compensation—and establishing the policies that govern the organization. As a leader of a school district, the superintendent, by definition of the role and authority, represents an imbalance of power with all stakeholder groups. An understanding of the superintendents social identity enables the leader to fully appreciate the varied perspectives of stakeholders which theoretically may enable them to make more effective decisions. An understanding of their own social identity may influence their behavior and decision making in a manner that will result in better outcomes for students. Efforts to develop more effective leaders often involve the leader understanding their strengths, weaknesses, values and motivations. For a leader to be truly effective it is necessary to account for how the leader will interact with the individuals who make up the organization. Understanding ones’ own social identity may enable the leader to more fully appreciate the perspectives of others. An appreciation and respect for difference and diversity may inform more effective school leadership. As the world we live in is more diverse and interconnected, schools are a microcosm where differences are evident in the classroom. An appreciation of varied perspectives, beliefs and points of view are essential core values for a school leader.
seeking to lead change initiatives. The beliefs and perceptions that inform the leaders’ social identity may influence how the leader makes educational decisions, with respect to setting policies and practices. In sharing their narratives, these four leaders offer examples of how their social identities shape their mission and core values as they endeavor to lead their respective school districts.

The process of identifying and sorting students by ability does not result in achieving equitable educational goals, but rather, socializes students and sorts them into specific functional roles in society (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu, 1979, 1990; Giroux, 1981, 2001 & Oakes, 1985). A number of studies critical of tracking underscore the fact that selection into tracks often has less to do with intellectual ability than with other factors, such as neatness and dress, politeness, obedience to authority, punctuality, and following directions (Nieto, 2000, 2004). Influential research by Oakes, Welner, Mickelson, Petrovich, and Saunders suggest that, in order to understand the academic and social impacts of tracking on students, one needs to understand the context and environment that underscores educational decision making. Research by Ansalone & Biafora (2004) confirmed educators as some of the main sponsors and decision makers in determining policies for ability grouping, as well as the track placement of specific students. Much research on the issue of tracking focuses on the advantages and disadvantages of grouping practices and examines whether it is preferable for students to learn in homogeneous or heterogeneous groups (Barr & Dreeben, 1983; Hallinan, 1994 & 2004; Kulik & Kulik, 1992). Researchers have shown repeatedly that students in lower tracks tend to achieve less and fail more often than do pupils in higher tracks (Lee & Bryk, 1988; Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Hallinan & Kubitschek, 1999; Van Houtte, 2004). Bandura and Dweck’s research on beliefs and attitudes of teachers advances the problem of the fixed mindset of some educators and provides evidence
that a hidden curriculum exists in the classroom, with respect to expectations for student learning. This narrative study serves as a forum to further understand how the beliefs, perceptions, and social identities of school superintendents inform their decision making, with respect to the preponderance of tracking practices evident in their school districts. Although all four participants reported that tracking practices are evident in their district, they cite the fluidity of movement across levels as evidence that the structures are not as rigid as in the past. Student outcomes and parent discretion have a role in student placement in an academic program. Additionally they all report that school culture and climate has an impact on outcomes for students. A student-centered philosophy that drives the culture and climate in a school often has a dramatic impact on the achievement outcomes for students. The literature provides examples of how the beliefs of students, parents, teachers, and principals impact tracking practices. The participants offered little evidence that they have addressed some of the inequities inherent in tracking practices. Many of their reflections focused on the implementation of programs aimed at meeting the needs of those whose needs were impacted by disability, poverty or by language and cultural barriers. The literature shows there has been minimal data on how superintendents may influence these practices with respect to tracking. This research moderately advances the field of knowledge and may inform changes within school districts to facilitate more equitable opportunities and effective outcomes for students. By focusing attention on the impact of tracking and how educational leaders may leverage their influence to inform change educational leaders may realize the importance of expanding opportunities and access to programs for all students. Implementation of “Open Honors” programs, whereby students are grouped heterogeneously and the student opts for the type of credit they will receive. Students can opt for honors (H) or college preparatory (CP) credit. All students access the same curriculum but the
output varies and students seeking honors may delve deeper into topics. Local data generated in the researchers school district show that when this options was offered to students forty percent of the students who been taking CP classes opted to take honors and they reported obtaining higher grades. Anecdotally, students reported greater self-efficacy and this was evidence that teachers held all students to higher expectations.

This study focused on identifying the superintendents’ social identity and determining the manner in which it influenced their views of intelligence and educational decision making related to tracking practices. The research results are reviewed with connections drawn within the theoretical framework and the literature review.

This study illustrated that superintendents’ views about intelligence are highly influential, in terms of their decision making regarding the educational process and structure in their educational organizations. All participants appeared to favor the view of intelligence proposed by incremental theory, as supported by Dweck (1999) and Bandura (1986; 1997). Based on the evolution of their social identity as informed by life experiences, all advocate for the belief that intelligence is flexible, malleable and can be expressed in a variety of talents and abilities. They all believe that individuals possess an infinite capacity for developing their intelligence. Based on this growth mindset, students can experience increased self-efficacy, greater achievement and personal growth. All participants within this study reported that some of their experiences challenged them, and that various factors—whether socioeconomic, demographic, or access to educational opportunities—all impacted their ability to learn, pursue higher education and achieve a desired status within their chosen profession. Their narratives are consistent with what incremental theory implies about personal development, that intelligence is not fixed, but malleable and evolves with experiences and education. Abilities and learning can be expanded
through education, persistence, and the belief that one has the capacity to achieve.

Some illustrative examples of how the incremental theory of intelligence impacted participants are reflected in the stories of Susan and Linda: While Susan was diagnosed with dysgraphia and faced numerous problems during her early years at school, she was persistent enough to achieve. Her resiliency and success enabled her to earn advanced degrees, including a doctoral degree. Though no formal educational supports were available to her in school, she sought all the necessary accommodations and was successful in school and in her chosen career. Though she faced challenges, through hard work and resiliency, she achieved high self-efficacy, which contributed to the successful completion of her educational and career goals.

Linda also demonstrated a high level of self-efficacy, which was the foundation for her educational and professional success. Raised in a large family, her family did not value education, and she found little support at home for formal schooling. However, she revealed the transformative potential of reading as a tool for self-education, and she firmly pursued her goal of advancing through school and college. Hence, if one ascribed to an entity theory of learning, this participant, who was from a poor and undereducated family, would be doomed to experience limited access to education and limited expectations and be tracked to a pathway that would have precluded her from achieving higher educational or career status (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002; Dweck, 1999).

Tom’s beliefs about intelligence were impacted by his life experiences. As a child, he was raised in a poor family and had a parent who was incarcerated. His initial response to this environment was to act out in school. His early academic profile could have put him on the pathway for dropping out or having an education profile defined by low academic performance, resulting in limited opportunities for higher education or gainful employment. However, his
outcomes changed because one educator intervened, believed in him, and took time to understand why he was behaving in a negative manner. The educator, his principal, offered him an opportunity to distance himself emotionally from troubles at home in order to pursue education with renewed interest and perseverance. Tom’s building principal gave this individual additional access and opportunities to programs. Given that students are more likely to embrace school norms if teachers are perceived to feel connected to students, the creation of supportive school environments can improve achievement outcomes for students (Wenzel, 1998; Tyler 2004). Tom stated that the connection to this educator was a turning point for him. Citing his beliefs and attitudes after that transformative encounter in his life, Tom maintains a view of intelligence as being flexible, attitude-driven, and unfixed. Educators’ affirmative perceptions of students can have a positive impact on the future outcomes for many students.

The determinism presented by research into self-fulfilling prophecies discussed by Dweck (1999), under the framework of entity theory, may be highlighted from the insights derived from the stories shared by the study participants. Within the construct of education, the nature of self-fulfilling prophecies supposes that students in the low tracks do not study hard or seek to achieve because they assume that their educational outcomes are predetermined. No matter how hard they try, they will not succeed. However, according to the participants’ experiences and views, intelligence is not a fixed entity, and students should be encouraged to understand that they will gain a lot from their education if they are supported and choose to invest in seeking opportunities. The outcomes of their educational successes were not determined by their socio-economic status or track, but rather, by their effort and perseverance. Additionally, their investment and engagement with educational professionals are essential to successful outcomes for all students. Linda focused on school, sought opportunities, and
expanded her opportunities with the support of educators and a desire to achieve. She graduated in the top ten percent of her class, proving that self-fulfilling prophecies do not have to be realized. However, if students believe in the predetermined nature of educational outcomes—especially when the educational structure is rigid and there are explicit tracking procedures in place—then they may not perceive opportunities to succeed. Each of the participants shared his or her specific philosophy on learning and intelligence. Additionally, they offered insights as to how these beliefs about learning can be integrated into their educational policies and practices as superintendents.

Interestingly, the reality of consistently relying on personal beliefs and attitudes with respect to educational decision making can be challenging. Through the discussions, participants cited examples in which the politics of issues sometimes challenged their ability to always make decisions in the best interest of students—especially with respect to grouping and inclusive practices. For instance, Eric pointed out that he did not consider intelligence fixed and favored a student-centered educational approach to address the individual learning styles of students. At the same time, he stated that the effective differentiation of instruction within a classroom is a challenge for many teachers. Additionally all participants stated that some substantially separate programming is necessary, based on the needs of some students with more intensive educational needs. They all agreed that effective differentiation is needed to meet individual student needs, and adjusting the curriculum to meet those individual needs relies on effective teachers. However, all of the participants disclosed that they are challenged make sure that all teachers are exceptional, trained, and effective in teaching all learners.

In some educational environments there exists a rigid tracking structure that continues to stratify and classify all students, based on criteria that is often not transparent. In many districts,
beliefs are held that students from lower tracks do not require exceptional instruction, because they simply have limited intelligence and aptitude to achieve. The concept of social reproduction theory often drives these beliefs systems, and some teachers and policy-makers believe that they are entrusted with the authority to decide what track is best for students. To some degree, there is an assumption that some classes of students cannot achieve or benefit from higher expectations. These observations are consistent with claims by Rist (1970) about educators unconsciously making assumptions about the limitation of students’ opportunities by their rank and classification in tracked classes. Petrovich and Wells (2009) discussed the impact of ineffective instruction and how some students have little access to exceptional instruction or no social capital to comprehend the value of effective instruction. The lack of access and opportunity for some students limits their ability to acquire knowledge and skills, thus limiting their opportunities to achieve.

Susan and Linda shared views about the structure of schooling that reflects the reality of social reproduction theory. They suggested that some students come to school being better prepared than others: They have more books, work with private tutors, and have a supportive family climate conducive to valuing education and directing the student toward higher achievement. However, they both concurred that educators should play the role of leveling the playing field for students—a place where students should aspire to higher education and be given equal chances and opportunities for success. Schools should become the forums of equal opportunity, and all students should have access to a rigorous program of studies.

All of the participants offered the view that it is essential to provide all students with a wide spectrum of educational resources and opportunities to foster their intellectual, social, and emotional development. All participants turned out to be proponents of the incremental theory
of Dweck (1999) and Bandura (1986; 1997), who argued for the unlimited potential of students to develop academically.

All participants shared their beliefs about tracking and inclusion, as well as their attitudes about equality and equity in education. All participants considered tracking to be a negative school policy because it limits students and seeks to predetermine their educational outcomes. They all cited initiatives implemented to eliminate these practices. Tom managed to implement a change in the organizational culture in his school by urging teachers to look more deeply and with more consideration into the roots of antisocial behavior among students and to help them overcome psychological and behavioral challenges to enable them to be more engaged in school. He cited the value of keeping middle school learners engaged. Brint (1998) reported that students in lower tracks are more likely to drop out. Wentzel (1998) suggested that increasing student engagement in school leads to higher grades (as measured by GPA) and in reducing dropouts. Engagement by educators can range from increasing expectations for students and the creation of learning communities in which students are connected with adults and/or have a wide range of academic and extracurricular programs for all students.

Tom reported favoring heterogeneous grouping and shared his strategy for instituting a school schedule that promoted heterogeneously grouped classes. Additionally, collaborating with teachers to offer a range of behavioral interventions for students helped to increase student engagement and reduce instances of student discipline referrals. Susan cited an evolution in practice in her role as a teacher working with diverse student populations in urban settings. She described how her beliefs informed her decision making when working with students assigned to school as part of court ordered diversion. By setting high expectations for academic performance and behavior, students were respected and were more engaged in their education.
In her current role as superintendent in a less diverse community she has attempted reforms to increase opportunities by opening access to AP courses and offering more inclusive programs for students with intensive disabilities.

With respect to acknowledging the educational equity gap with students who presented with cultural and racial differences, only Linda and Tom attempted to implement change to close achievement gaps and increase access. Linda described how she fought to reform the METCO program and challenged the values of the community to support reform. As she and her team persuaded the community to confront their values and norms, reforms were undertaken. There were successful outcomes for students in this program. When Tom faced an increase in families with students that had little formal education and language barriers, he was propelled to lead change. He invited the newly arrived families to meet, and he enlisted their help to set up programs to assure that the students would access appropriate educational services in an inclusive setting. Both acted to intervene, when they noted that populations of students were underserved, thus creating achievement gaps.

Welner, and Bezoa (2009) and Anyon (1980) describe the philosophy aimed at detracking as a necessity to remove the inequities and inequalities that rigid school structures impart to students. Public schools should be objective and safe forums for students to access a rigorous curriculum, while the task of educators entrusted to them by the community is to provide all educational resources fairly and fully to all students. This way, all students receive an opportunity to develop their intelligence, based on an individual level of motivation and self-efficacy. The task of educators and schools in general is to promote education by assuring that all students have access to educational programs and can make connections to educators who will hold them to high expectations and assure that they have the chance to achieve and
succeed—academically, socially and emotionally.

The insights and reflections of the participants in this study elicit a deeper understanding about the impact of family, life, and educational experiences on the decision making of four school superintendents. The evolution of each of the participants’ social identities and their beliefs about learning serve to inform their decision making on matters that profoundly impact student outcomes. Emerging themes focus on the role of politics in educational agenda setting, how demographics and school experiences impacted their opportunities and outcomes, how their experiences informed the development of their belief systems, how connections with adults impacted their life experiences, and how their beliefs drive their decisions about educational programming.

**Limitations of Study**

One of the limitations of this study was that there were only four participants. The sample size makes it impossible to generalize the results. The design and nature of the narrative study, is more subjective and, thus, limits the transferability of results (Creswell 2007). However, in order to inform the validity, credibility, integrity and criticality—all steps necessary for a study to have meaning—the researcher used three devices to record interviews and a professional transcription service to provide accurate interview transcripts. While there were only four participants, authenticity was reflected by the multiple voices reflected in the data analysis and its’ interpretations. In order to ensure a level of trustworthiness, all participants were given the interview questions and sent the transcripts for review. As the narrative tradition is iterative and reflexive, it is imperative to understand the process of data collection, which was initiated at the first interview. Given that the research and data rely on stories, it was important to conceptualize the participants’ recollections and reflections so as to capture the essence of
each individuals’ experience within the context of the research questions and hypothesis.

One of the strengths of the study was that each participant engaged willingly, and they all articulated that they enjoyed reflecting on their life experiences and how they influenced their professional practice. All participants spoke openly and honestly and were engaged in the dialogue. They were candid about their experiences, despite some of the stories and reflections being difficult to relate and discuss. With respect to positionality, the relationship of the researcher to the participants may be a perceived strength. The researcher had only professional and collegial relationships with the participants; therefore, there were no ethical considerations that would confound data collection. No conflict of interest or imbalance of power existed. Participants volunteered upon receipt of an invitation. The participants who volunteered most likely did so as we do have a collegial relationship. They were selected as the districts they lead met the inclusion criteria. At each session I reiterated that they had the opportunity to opt out. Also they received transcripts of each interview and had the option to review, revise and edit. No changes were suggested and they reported being comfortable sharing their stories. Thus, conversations flowed easily, without pressure or discomfort. All participants were grateful for the opportunity to reflect on their practice and examine how their personal journeys inform their professional practice.

**Findings and Recommendations for Future Research**

This study elicited stories and insights on the evolution of beliefs and attitudes of school superintendents as these attributes informed their decision making on the educational practices of tracking and grouping in their respective districts. There was little evidence of research on this topic. Therefore, the study sought to inform future research through a discussion of themes that emerged from four narrative conversations. Future research could focus on a larger quantitative
collection of data to collect more information on how the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of school superintendents could inform a change in educational practices, with respect to grouping and tracking.

The concept of social identity, as it relates to decision making constructs within educational organizations, has also been neglected in the research. Understanding how family background, socio-economic status, school, and life experiences influence beliefs and attitudes has not been evident in the literature, as it pertains to decision making in the educational environment. A deeper understanding of how the beliefs and attitudes of school leaders inform their decision making is necessary, in order to better inform educational practices. An examination of grouping practices in schools, as informed by beliefs and attitudes toward learning, could lead to the identification of more effective instructional practices and more effective achievement outcomes for students. With respect to examining research on how beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions drive decision making on grouping practices, the review of literature indicates that students, parents, teachers, and school principals have been the subject of research. The stakeholder group that has not been represented in the research is school superintendents. Superintendents routinely establish policies and practices that are intended to afford equitable access to programs and impact student outcomes. Therefore, further research on this topic may inform transformational change for students. Additionally, an examination of how superintendents acquire their beliefs and attitudes toward intelligence and the impact of these beliefs on practice and decision making may have a profound impact on outcomes for students.

The participants in this study offered rich, detailed descriptions of how their beliefs and attitudes evolved and informed their practice. Themes that emerged were how they were
perceived as learners in school, how they developed connections with educators who impacted their life journey, and how, through the attainment of educational credentials, they attained positions that provided them with the authority to make systemic decisions that impact students. They also discussed the role of politics, as they strived to initiate transformational change within their schools. Any one of these themes could inform additional research.

If given the opportunity to conduct additional research I would propose a larger quantitative or mixed methods study that would elicit data on beliefs and how they inform decision making on the instructional practice of tracking. In addition to this survey of school superintendents, I would seek to conduct a survey with school committee and school board members. Both of these stakeholders are underrepresented in the research; but both have the power and authority to initiate transformational change aimed at increasing access, opportunities and achievement for students.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Conducting this research has enabled the researcher to further reflect on personal practices, beliefs, and attitudes. As a school leader, I engaged our team to reflect on our expectations and desired outcomes for all students. We examined our local practices and are seeking to initiate change to offer more equitable access to programs for all our students. The Program of Studies at our high school reflects a range of course offerings including the opportunity to take classes that are designated “Open Honors”. These courses enable students to opt for taking credit at the honors level or college preparatory level. This option offers heterogeneous class composition and enables the student to drive the instructional program. Through a range of courses that offer personalized instruction, student-centered educational opportunities increase access to opportunities for a wide range of students. Additionally, an
examining grading and assessment practices informs a school-wide analysis of beliefs about learning and leads to an understanding of how standards-based instructional practice can be implemented to increase educational outcomes for students by focusing on instructional outcomes. Using political and social capital as a tool to inform transformative change is a strategy that all of the participants cited as an important factor in the decision-making. Putting deposits in the political, social, and emotional bank account within a community can help the educational leader when the stakes for change are high. Seeking political capital is an essential skill and tool in the educational leader’s repertoire, if they are to be successful in garnering support for change from various stakeholders.

The stories shared by all of the participants described varied experiences with respect to how their roles evolved as school leaders. They were all committed to reflective practice and were open to sharing how their beliefs inform practice in their local school districts. Some of the applications of this data may inform a variety of instructional practices and interventions. As the research highlights, educators are perhaps the most influential individuals in a person’s life (Konold et al., 2008). The attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of educators can shape educational policies and practices in schools.

**School Leaders as Reflective Practitioners**

By sharing their stories, all participants noted that the interview sessions prompted them to reflect on their experiences. Many of them had never revealed the stories they shared or connected their experiences to their practice. The opportunity to reflect on practice is an activity that all of the participants indicated they would be more mindful of. Reflection on best practices and understanding the underlying reasons for why and how leaders make decisions may result in more thoughtful decisions that will benefit students.
Beliefs about Intelligence and the Impact on the Expectations of Educators

An understanding about how the beliefs of educational practitioners inform their view of intelligence may result in better outcomes for students. Dweck (1975) explored the role of expectations and attributions of intelligence as they relate to student outcomes. In Dweck’s study, designations about intelligence affected the perceptions of the educator as they made assessments about the intelligence of students. If an educator ascribes to the theory that intelligence is fixed, as opposed to being malleable, then the outcomes for students are fixed and limited. A deeper understanding of how educators perceive intelligence and how this informs their beliefs about learning may cause educators to reflect and make more effective and inclusive decisions on program and practices.

Beliefs and Attitudes and How They Inform Decision Making

An understanding of how the beliefs of educational leaders inform decision making and the development of educational polices may result in more equitable opportunities and access for students. As participants, these four school superintendents sought to more deeply understand how they are perceived and unpack their motivations through this narrative study. Through the reflective process, they had the opportunity to change and alter their decision making strategies. Insight on how experiences inform beliefs and how these beliefs inform decision making may result in more student-centered decision making and better outcomes and programming in schools.

Student-centered Learning as a Reflection of Best Educational Practice

All of the study participants cited the importance of implementing policies and practices that were student-centered. Various interventions, such as alternative learning programs for students who have experienced challenges to learning, can foster more positive outcomes for
students. Study participants cited experiences whereby they implemented transformational change by developing programs aimed at meeting the needs of students who faced barriers to learning. Creating innovative programs is effective policy and affords access and opportunities to all students. By engaging in this type of educational decision making, student achievement outcomes are bolstered and students are afforded the opportunity to be successful.

**Connections Between Adults and Students**

Creating and fostering nurturing relationships between educators and students can offer students the opportunity to engage in a more personalized educational program. All of the study participants cited the influence of one educator that reached out and made a connection that was life alternating for them. Educational environments that promote community and engage students and families, who have a stake in educational outcomes, benefits students and society. Connections through personalized education, mentorships, and internships are all powerful strategies to create relationships between educators and students.

**Conclusion**

School based policies may serve to widen achievement gaps and limit access and opportunities for students (Oakes, 1990). Research shows that the process of sorting and classifying students is less about educational outcomes and more about retaining and promoting school structures that are aimed at organizing students for expedience, as well as supporting teaching practices that continue to be based on the philosophy that one size does fit all. The body of literature highlights research on the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions that form the foundation of these practices. Research has analyzed the beliefs of students, teachers, parents, and principals; however, the role of school superintendents has not been fully explored. This narrative study explored the beliefs of four school superintendents and how their backgrounds,
demographics, school experiences and life experiences informed their beliefs. Additionally, this study elicited stories on how their belief systems inform educational decision making, with respect to grouping practices. The themes that emerged from these narrative conversations illustrated that all of the participants believe in a student-centered approach to education, all students have a right to access rigorous educational programs and public education levels the playing field for students who live in poverty or experience barriers to educational success.

While philosophically they all agree that tracking and academic grouping offers limited advantages to students, they are confounded by the political realities of their roles in making transformative change, with respect to continued prevalence of these practices. All described successes in developing varied programs to meet the needs of diverse learners; but all agree that fully inclusive programs are challenging to implement. At the core of the tracking debate is how to increase equity and achievement in education for all students. While detracking is an obvious solution other options could include the implementation of inclusive practices and co-teaching. Additionally, enabling students to move more fluidly between tracks may encourage students to achieve and seek to work harder if mobility was more easily accessible. Offering professional development to educators on increasing expectations for all students may impact students’ academic achievement. Most importantly developing a school culture that reflects a socio-political agenda and educational philosophy that is student-centered and puts student achievement at the core of the mission can improve opportunities and outcomes for all students.

How the results and insights from this study are used may serve to challenge educators and educational leaders to create policies and practices aimed at meeting the diverse needs of students and assure that more rigorous achievement outcomes for all learners drive national and local decision making.
“Although social change cannot come overnight we must always work as though it were a possibility in the morning.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A
Informed Consent Documentation

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Student Investigator: Maureen Sabolinski

Principal Investigator: Kristal Clemons Ph. D.

Title of Study: The Social Identity of School Superintendents’ and Their Attitudes and Perceptions on the Structure of Educational Tracking in Public Education

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a doctoral research study. This document will describe the study and will explain the extent of your participation. The study will also be explained to you by the researcher. You may ask questions and reflect on your willingness to be a participant. You do not have to participate and you may withdraw from the study at any time. If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to sign this consent form. You will be furnished with a copy of the informed consent for your records. Please be advised that this research is being done to complete requirements for a doctoral degree and not for publication in any professional journal.

Why have I been invited to be part of this study?

As a veteran Superintendent of Schools (served in the role for a minimum of five years) you have been selected to further understand how social identity beliefs and perceptions of the Superintendent informs educational decision making with respect to educational tracking practices.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this narrative study is to understand how the social identity and beliefs of
educational leaders, specifically the superintendent of schools may affect decision making that maintains the practice of tracking in secondary public educational programs. This narrative study will explore the social identity of superintendents’ and their attitudes and beliefs about intelligence and the influence on educational decision making.

**What will my participation involve?**

Participation in this study will involve a commitment to be interviewed for three sessions lasting 45-60 minutes. Sessions will be audio taped and the tapes will be transcribed professionally. You will be given a copy of the transcript to review for accuracy.

An outline of each session is provided.

**Session I** will focus on collecting demographic data, stories from childhood and experiences in K-12 education.

**Session II** will explore stories from higher education and will focus on professional experiences.

**Session III** will explore leadership within the district and will explore the narrative of experience in the school setting.

**Where will this study be conducted and what is the time commitment?**

The interviews will be conducted in a site selected by the participant. The interviews will be scheduled at a time convenient for the participant. Each session will be 45-60 and adherence to the time frame will be respected by the researcher.

**What is the risk to the participant?**

There is no identified risk to the participants. Identity will be coded and only the research and advisor will have access to the key. At the conclusion of the study all transcripts and audio tapes will be shredded professionally. At no time in this study will the identity of the participants or of his/her affiliate district be made public. Confidentiality of the participants will
be respected in all aspects of this study.

**Who will access my personal information?**

The only individual who will access your information is the researcher. Each participant will be assigned a confidential identification code. All information and transcripts will be maintained in a secure fire proof file cabinet. At the conclusion of the study all information’s and data will be destroyed. The final dissertation will not identify any individual or school district.

**What is the benefit participant’s in this study?**

There is no direct benefit to any participant. However, insights and reflections from the study may help educational leaders acquire insights into how beliefs and social identity inform their decision making. Insights may offer reflections that may help inform educational programs that will support students.

**What are my rights if I elect not to participate in this study?**

You may elect not to participate and not required to be a participant. At any time during this study you may end participation. During the interviews you may choose not to answer specific questions and you may end participation at any moment. If you choose not to participate you may discard this form.

**Who may I contact if I can further questions or concerns about this study?**

Maureen Sabolinski
Student Researcher
55 Jefferson Road, Franklin, MA 02038
sabolinski.m@husky.neu.edu
508-282-0575
Kristal Clemons, Ph.D.
Principal Investigator
Northeastern University
College of Professional Studies
360 Huntington Ave.  42 BV
Boston, MA 02115
k.clemons@neu.edu

Who may I contact to discuss my rights as a participant?

Any questions about your rights as a study participant may be directed to the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Queries can be directed to: Nan Regina Director Human Subject Research Protection, CPS, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. The phone number is: 617-373-4588 and email: n.regina@neu.edu or irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you so choose.

Will participants be compensated?

There is no compensation for participation. Participants will be given a gift card at the conclusion of the study to acknowledge the time allocated to the study.

Will there be a cost to participants?

There is no cost to participants in the study. They only cost is the time required to participate in the interviews and to review interview transcripts.

Informed Consent Checklist

Title: The Social Identity of School Superintendents’ and Their Attitudes and Perceptions on the Structure of Educational Tracking in Public Education
Student Researcher: Maureen Sabolinski

**Consent Affirmation Initial**

1. I confirm I have read and understood the information _______

   I was offered the opportunity to ask questions, consider
   the information and have all questions answered in a manner
   that I understand.

2. In understand that my participation is voluntary and that I _______

   am free to withdraw as a participant at any time. I understand
   withdrawal will have no consequences for me as an individual.

3. I have been informed that the interviews will be taped recorded _______

   and tapes will be professionally transcribed. I give consent to be
   recorded and I understand that all tapes and transcripts will be
   destroyed at the end of the project.

4. I understand all information will be treated as confidential and _______

   the identity of the participant will be anonymous.

5. I agree to allow the use of anonymous direct quotes from my _______

   interview if needed in the dissertation document.
Consent to Participate / Signature Page

I ______________________________________ have read this document and was offered the opportunity to ask questions regarding this consent form. I was offered the opportunity to have information clarified. I fully understand the expectations for my participation. I fully understand the nature of my participation and the risks to me has been clearly articulated. I agree to participate in narrative study on a voluntary basis. I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time during the course of this study.

I agree to be a participant in this study: The Social Identity of School Superintendents’ and Their Attitudes and Perceptions on the Structure of Educational Tracking in Public Education conducted by student researcher, Maureen Sabolinski.

____________________________________________
Research Participant   (Printed Name)

____________________________________________
__________________ Date
Research Participant   (Signature)

____________________________________________
__________________ Date
Researcher /Individual that Explained Consent

CC: Participant

Principal Investigator

Student Researcher file
APPENDIX B

Invitation to Participate

Sent via mail and email

July 2015

Dear ____________:

Please consider this invitation to participate in the research study I am conducting as a requirement to complete a doctoral degree at Northeastern University. The topic for this research is to examine the social identity of school superintendents and their attitudes and perceptions on the structure of educational tracking in public schools. This narrative study will explore the patterns that emerge in participants’ interviews in order to understand how life experiences and their social identity may influence their beliefs and perceptions. Framing participants’ experiences and stories may reveal a deeper understanding of how their perceptions may inform decision making within their public school district.

Participation in this study will involve scheduling three interviews lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. Interviews will be scheduled at your convenience and at a site to which you agree. You have been invited to participate, based on your experiences as a superintendent of schools. Your insights and reflections will help me to further understand the impact of the educational leader on programs to support students.

Your decision to participate in this study is voluntary, and you may elect to not answer any questions during the interview process. Your identity and the identity of your school district will remain confidential and will not be published in any document.

I have enclosed a copy of the Informed Consent Document for your review. If you have questions or would like to volunteer to participate in this study, please contact me at
508-282-0575 or at sabolinski.m@husky.neu.edu.

Thank you for your consideration to be part of my research.

Respectfully,

Maureen Sabolinski

Student Researcher/Doctoral Candidate

Northeastern University
APPENDIX C

Interview Appointment Communications

Sent By Email

Date:

Dear ____________:

Thank you for committing to participate in this research study. Your insights and reflections are appreciated and will add to the body of knowledge on my topic. I would like to schedule a time to meet for the first interview. As the Informed Consent indicates, the purpose of this narrative study is to understand how the social identity and beliefs of educational leaders, specifically the superintendent of schools, may affect decision making that maintains the practice of tracking in secondary public educational programs. This study will explore the social identity of superintendents and their attitudes and beliefs about intelligence and the influence on educational decision making.

I will defer to your schedule as we set a time to meet. Please email or call to set up a mutually agreed upon time and location for our interview. I can be reached at 508-801-6627 (cell) or by email at sabolinski.m@husky.neu.edu.

Thank you,

Maureen Sabolinski

Student Researcher/ Doctoral Candidate

Northeastern University
APPENDIX D

Narrative Study Interview Questions/Session I

Three Sessions of 45-60 minutes

Participant Identification Code:

Location of Interview:

Date of Session:

Start Time: 
End Time:

Session I

Session I will focus on collecting demographic data, stories from childhood and experience in K-12 education.

1) Can you share stories about your background, including reflections on family, siblings, cultural heritage, religious traditions, educational history of your parents and other influential family members?

2) Can you share your recollections about entry into elementary school?
   a. Type of school
   b. Programmatic reflections
   c. Reflections on academics, teachers, friends

3) Can you share any events or reflections about relationships with teachers during elementary school?

4) As an elementary student, do you have any stories about how you may have perceived yourself as a student? How others perceived you?

5) Are there any other stories or memories you may want to share about your experiences in K-5 education?
6) Can you share memories or stories about middle school/junior high school?
   a. Structure/organization of schools
   b. Relationships with teachers, peers

7) What are some reflections you can share about middle school and its influence on you as an individual?

8) Can you share some reflections on the high you attended?
   a. Type of school/size
   b. Types of students/co-ed, diversity

9) Can you reflect on the structure of the HS, the academic programs?

10) Can you describe how HS may have supported or hindered you as you developed perceptions about yourself as a student?

11) Are there any other reflections you would like to share today?
Narrative Study Interview Questions/Session II

Three Sessions of 45-60 minutes

Participant Identification Code:

Location of Interview:

Date of Session:

Start Time: End Time:

Session II

Session II will explore stories from higher education and will focus on professional experiences.

1) As you prepared to graduate from HS, how did you formulate your post-secondary plan?
   a. College, military, work
   b. What was the role of academic advising? What influenced your decision making?

2) Can you share how HS experiences influenced your decision making to seek post-secondary education or other options?

3) Can you reflect on how your HS experiences shaped your college experiences?

4) Can you reflect on college/university experiences?
   a. Academics
   b. Social
   c. Vocational: internships, jobs, fellowships, community service

5) Can you share your experience post college?
   a. Jobs, community service
   b. Relationships with professional peers, mentors

6) Can you share your reflections on how college informed your career decisions? What stories can you share about the path you took in your career?
7) Can you share some of your professional work experiences?
   a. Goals toward obtaining educational credential
   b. Stories from positions you held
   c. Beliefs about learning that may have evolved from experiences

8) Can you share about your journey to the superintendency?
   a. What drove decision
   b. Any reflections on what influenced your decision
      i. K-12 education, family, mentors

9) Can you reflect on the influences that help you make decision on policies and practices?
Narrative Study Interview Questions/Session III

Three Sessions of 45-60 minutes

Participant Identification Code:

Location of Interview

Date of Session:

Start Time: End Time:

Session III

Session III will explore leadership within the district and the narrative of experience in the school setting.

1) Reflect on how you made the decision to serve as a superintendent in your district

2) Can you share reflections on the academic organization of your HS?

3) Can you share your beliefs and perceptions about the connection between your leadership, decision making, and the practices in your high school?

4) Can you share about how your beliefs about learning and intelligence, including your decision making within the district?

5) What influences have impacted your decision making as the superintendent?

6) Is there anything you may want to add? Any additional stories or reflections you might share?