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“I’m Not Going to Be, Like, for the AP”: English Language Learners’ Limited Access to Advanced College-Preparatory Courses in High School

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Advancement to postsecondary education for English language learners (ELLs) can be seriously constrained by a lack of academic preparation during high school. Currently, ELLs lag behind their non-ELL peers in their level of access to advanced college-preparatory courses. Through a qualitative case study of ELL education at a large public high school, we examine the educational practices that result in ELLs’ restricted curricular choices. The findings expose the way in which ELLs’ chances for rigorous academic preparation are systematically reduced and point to the importance of providing ELLs with high-level academic curriculum while also supplying linguistic scaffolding that makes such learning possible.

KEYWORDS: English language learners, college access, high school, tracking

Until recently, the default educational expectation for secondary-level English language learners (ELLs), students with limited English proficiency, has been high school graduation at best (Callahan & Gándara, 2004). However, the past several years have seen a growing interest in ELLs’ participation in postsecondary education (e.g., Callahan & Gándara, 2004; Flores, Batalova, & Fix, 2012; Kanno & Cromley, 2013a, 2013b; Nuñez & Sparks, 2012; Razfar & Simon, 2011; Rodriguez & Cruz, 2009).

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This growing interest is partly due to demographic trends. At roughly 4.4 million (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014), ELLs are the fastest growing segment of the K–12 student population and are predicted to represent 25% of all public school students by 2025 (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Since the United States is already lagging behind other developed nations in producing college graduates (Carnevale & Rose, 2011), it cannot afford to leave such a large segment of the student population undereducated. However, ELLs' underrepresentation in postsecondary education is also a matter of civil rights. The United States is a nation that guarantees the educational rights of all children regardless of their backgrounds, including national origin (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2011). If the education of a specific group of students is being compromised for reasons related to being speakers of languages other than English—which is considered part of national origin—their educational rights are in fact being violated.

The reality, however, is grim. A recent statistical analysis of the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002; Kanno & Cromley, 2013b) revealed that ELLs' access to postsecondary education in general, and to four-year colleges and universities in particular, is far more limited than that of their non-ELL peers: In 2006, only 19% of ELLs advanced to four-year institutions directly from high school compared with 45% of monolingual English-speaking students and 35% of linguistic minority students who were fully proficient in English. One of the major predictors of college access was students' academic preparation in high school, which is consistent with other studies of college success (e.g., Cabrera, Burkum, & La Nasa, 2005). But it is precisely in this area that ELLs suffer acutely. Several studies have found that ELLs have limited access to advanced-level courses such as honors and advanced placement (AP) courses (Callahan, 2005; Callahan, Wilkinson, & Muller, 2010; Harklau, 1994a, 1994b; Wang & Goldschmidt, 1999).

However, while research has shown that ELLs have limited opportunities for exposure to a high-level academic curriculum in high school, research has not yet identified why and how such limited curricular access comes about. The present study seeks to address this gap in the literature through a qualitative case study of ELL education at a large public high school. We ask the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What institutional mechanisms at this school, if any, inhibit ELLs' access to advanced college-preparatory courses (hereafter, *high-track courses*)?

Research Question 2: How do teachers' and guidance counselors' beliefs and practices affect ELLs' course selection?

Research Question 3: How do ELLs and their parents respond to the school's course recommendations?

Literature Review

Minority and low socioeconomic status (SES) students' limited access to a rigorous curriculum and high-level courses has been discussed in the literature on tracking (e.g., Lucas, 1999; Oakes, 2005; Rosenbaum, 1976). Current literature on tracking delineates both the demographic representations within particular tracks and the notable limitations of tracking for both ELL and non-ELL student populations.

Tracking Representation Patterns and Consequences for the General Student Population

A large body of literature demonstrates that tracking, or ability grouping of students for instructional purposes, has never been entirely meritocratic (e.g., Finley, 1984; Hallinan, 1994; Lucas, 1999; Oakes, 2005). White and Asian students are overrepresented in higher tracks while Black and Hispanic students are disproportionately assigned to lower tracks (College Board, 2012; Finkelstein & Fong, 2008; Lucas, 1999). Higher track placement also tends to correspond with higher SES (Lucas, 1999; Oakes, 2005). Since some groups of students are given more opportunities to learn than others on the basis of their backgrounds rather than their abilities, tracking has long been condemned as discriminatory and particularly damaging to under-represented populations (Lucas, 1999; Oakes, 2005; Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002).

Low-track placement is damaging in several ways. First, students in low-track classes do not have the same opportunities to develop higher order thinking as do students in high-track classes because high-track classes emphasize problem solving, critical thinking, original ideas, and passion for the subject matter whereas low-track classes focus on self-discipline, respect for others, and basic literacy and math skills (Oakes, 2005; Raudenbush, Rowan, & Cheong, 1993). The different emphases of high- and low-track classes correspond closely with the skill sets needed in professional and working-class jobs, respectively (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

Second, students in different tracks experience markedly different classroom climates. High-track teachers report positive and trusting relationships with their students (Oakes, 2005) while low-track teachers and students tend to develop antagonistic relationships with each other (Katz, 1999). Not surprisingly, low-track teachers spend more class time on classroom management than high-track teachers, resulting in less instructional time for low-track students (Hallinan, 1994; Oakes, 2005).

Third and most important, high-track courses lead to better academic outcomes than low-track courses as measured by test scores (Long, Conger, & Iatarola, 2012; Schneider, Swanson, & Riegle-Crumb, 1998), high school graduation rates (Long et al., 2012), and college attendance and/or graduation rates (Adelman, 2006; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Long

et al., 2012). Adelman's (2006) analysis of the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88) showed that taking Algebra 2 was no longer sufficient for college readiness: Only math coursework beyond Algebra 2 (i.e., trigonometry, precalculus, and calculus) was a positive predictor of bachelor's degree completion. At the same time, "not everyone has the chance to reach beyond Algebra 2" (Adelman, 2006, p. 31). More than half of Hispanic students and students from the lowest SES quintile attended schools that offered no calculus class (Adelman, 2006).

Tracking Representation Patterns and Consequences for ELLs

Representation patterns in tracking also emerge for ELLs. Callahan's (2005) study of a large rural high school in California found that fewer than 2% of ELLs took the set of courses that would make them eligible for admissions to four-year colleges. Analyses of large-scale data also show that ELLs are greatly underrepresented in high-track courses in both middle school (Wang & Goldschmidt, 1999) and in high school (Callahan et al., 2010; Kanno & Cromley, 2013a, 2013b). Callahan et al.'s (2010) analysis of the ELS:2002 compared course-taking patterns of linguistic minority students who were placed in ELL programs to other linguistic minority students who were not placed in the program. Even after controlling for demographic, family, and school background factors; prior academic achievement; and English proficiency, linguistic minority students in ELL programs were 45% less likely to enroll in college-preparatory science courses and 48% less likely to enroll in college-preparatory social science courses than linguistic minority students not placed in ELL programs. The fact that ELL designation limits students' curricular access is ironic since ELL education is a direct result of the *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) decision, which was meant to "ensure academic parity and equity in curricular access" (Callahan et al., 2010, p. 87).¹

Arizona's recent educational policy is also relevant in the context of ELL tracking because it represents an extreme and alarming case of ELLs' academic and linguistic isolation from the mainstream curriculum (Gándara & Orfield, 2012; Lillie, Markos, Arias, & Wiley, 2012). Arizona adopted the Structured English Immersion (SEI) model in 2008, which mandated four hours of daily English language instruction for ELLs (Gándara & Orfield, 2012; Lillie et al., 2012). The assumption underlying this model is that by receiving such intensive English language instruction, ELLs will make enough gains in English proficiency to be moved into the general education classroom within one year. In reality, however, ELLs rarely exit the SEI program in one year (Lillie et al., 2012). As a result, ELLs' access to English-speaking peers and to academic content learning is severely restricted for significant portions of their high school years.

Consequences of low tracking for ELLs that have been reported are similar to those for other students in general, including low academic outcomes

(Callahan et al., 2010; Wang & Goldschmidt, 1999), lack of opportunity for developing critical thinking skills, and disruptive classroom climates (Harklau, 1994a, 1994b). However, there are also negative consequences of low tracking that are particularly damaging to ELLs. One such consequence is the inhibition of second-language development. Harklau's (1994a, 1994b) ethnographic study of ELLs and tracking shows that low-track students' interactions with texts were limited to decoding the textbook and finding keywords or sentences in short texts whereas high-track students were expected to engage in extensive discussion based on a variety of authentic texts. Also, when ELLs are isolated from their English-speaking peers for the majority of their school day because they are taking mostly ELL classes, their opportunities to interact with native English speakers are severely curtailed (Gándara & Orfield, 2012; Valdés, 2001). Further, in extreme cases of segregation such as Arizona, where ELLs are not even placed in the low track but simply removed from most of the regular academic curriculum while they are learning English, students run the serious risk of being unable to fulfill the graduation requirements because so much of their school day is occupied by SEI classes. As Gándara and Orfield (2012) point out, "It is virtually impossible for students at the high school to acquire the credits they need to graduate with their peers, ready for college if they spend multiple years in such a setting" (p. 16).

In all, while research has begun to address the problem of ELLs' limited access to the rigorous coursework in high school, the majority of existing studies have focused on demonstrating the limited access and its negative consequences. We still do not know much about what causes the limited access. Arizona's situation is simple to explain in that respect: ELLs in that state are simply denied access to an academic curriculum until their English proficiency has sufficiently developed. But even in other states where there is no such segregationist policy, why is ELLs' access to advanced college-preparatory courses so limited? Callahan et al. (2010) offer a few possible explanations: (a) The combination of the required ELL courses and the core graduation requirements leaves little room on their rosters for elective courses such as lab science and high-track courses and (b) high-track teachers may be reluctant to address ELLs' linguistic needs in their courses. Although these explanations are plausible, these are post hoc interpretations of statistical findings. Whereas quantitative studies have clearly demonstrated that ELL designation has a negative impact on students' access to high-track courses, they do not explain why and how that happens. For the latter, qualitative research that delves deeply into a local context and examines its dynamics is needed (Maxwell, 2004; Merriam, 2009). Adopting a qualitative case study approach (Merriam, 2009), we studied ELL education at a large public high school in a working-class neighborhood in Pennsylvania and examined the educational practices that reduced ELL students' curricular options.

Theoretical Framework: Academic English Proficiency as Linguistic Capital

In theorizing our inquiry, we utilized Bourdieu's (1977, 1991; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) theory of cultural reproduction and drew particularly on the notion of linguistic capital. For Bourdieu (1977), language is a form of "praxis" (p. 646); it is meant for actual use. Therefore, what is of interest is not abstract linguistic *competence*—the ability to produce an infinite number of grammatical sentences in a Chomskyan sense—but rather linguistic *capital*, the amount of power one can claim in the social world on the basis of one's linguistic ability and use. For Bourdieu, communication is not merely an exchange of information but "an act of power" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 145).

Like other forms of capital, the value of a particular form of linguistic capital depends on the linguistic market in which it is deployed. Within the linguistic market of school, native or native-like proficiency in English, especially proficiency in academic English, is a highly coveted form of capital. Proficiency in academic English, "a variety or a register of English used in professional books and characterized by the specific linguistic features associated with academic disciplines" (Scarcella, 2003, p. 9), is an integral part of the larger cultural capital set—along with familiarity with the practices and norms of the school and ability to advocate effectively for oneself with institutional agents—that can give a student an advantage in securing further educational opportunities. It is true that academic language "has never been anyone's mother tongue" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 115) and has to be developed through pedagogical training in the school. Nonetheless, middle-class, native English-speaking children have a distinct advantage because of the alignment between their home language use and school language use (Hart & Risley, 2003); they can build on the language proficiency resulting from their primary socialization in the home (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In contrast, ELLs are doubly disadvantaged: They did not receive primary socialization in English at home, and their opportunities to develop academic English proficiency at school are limited (Harklau, 1994b; Slama, 2012).

Theoretically, ELLs are defined as those students who have not yet acquired grade-level academic English proficiency (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002, Sec. 9101[25]; Wright, 2006). This definition suggests the possibility of achieving linguistic and academic parity. In reality, schools make it difficult for those who begin with little cultural capital to accumulate any substantial amount of cultural capital through subsequent school education (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 62). Slama (2012) recently found that the majority of secondary-level ELLs do not reach sufficient levels of academic English proficiency to exit from the ELL program until close to the end of high school. Such findings illustrate the near impossibility of reaching parity on an

unequal playing field. In this way, the education system reproduces the unequal distribution of cultural capital by widening, rather than narrowing, the gap in the initial cultural capital with which ELLs and non-ELLs begin.

Being placed in a linguistic market in which the hierarchy of the value placed on linguistic products is firmly established, ELLs are likely to develop a particular linguistic habitus, “a sense of the acceptability and of the probable value of its own linguistic products and of those of others” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 145), that reflects the value system of the linguistic market. They are likely to learn to devalue their own bilingualism and non-native variety of English and come to accept limited educational opportunities because of their linguistic “deficits” (Dabach, 2010). That is, they may “misrecognize” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 13) their marginalized status as a natural consequence of a meritocratic system.

Methodology

The data used for this study come from a larger longitudinal qualitative case study that followed eight ELLs’ transitions from high school to postsecondary education, with the central goal of identifying the academic and institutional challenges ELLs faced in reaching postsecondary education. Kanno collected all the data; Kangas joined the project at the data analysis stage. The fieldwork lasted from May 2010 to August 2012, during which Kanno visited the school 70 times.

Those who specialize in qualitative case studies argue that case studies are uniquely suited to examining “how things get to be the way they are” in educational settings (Sanders, 1981, p. 47; see also Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). While the results of case studies are not generalizable in the same way as quantitative studies—a delimitation of the present study—case studies can offer what Erickson (1986) calls concrete universals (p. 130). Speaking of classroom teaching, Erickson argues, “Each instance of a classroom is seen as its own unique system which nonetheless displays universal properties of teaching” (p. 130). Similarly, we would argue that the educational practices taking place in one high school that result in ELLs’ confinement to low-track classes are reflective of at least some aspects of the universal mechanisms of ELLs’ tracking across the country. Thus, we believe that many researchers as well as practitioners working with ELLs at public high schools will find our results relevant and applicable to their settings.

The School

Brighton High School,² the site of this study, is a suburban public high school in Pennsylvania. With more than 2,500 students, it is one of the largest public schools in the region. The school is both ethnically and linguistically diverse. The ethnic composition of the school is 42% White, 42% Black, 13% Asian, and 3% Hispanic. Many Brighton students are bilingual or

multilingual; altogether they speak over 40 languages. The school is located in a predominantly working-class neighborhood on the fringe of a large metropolitan city, and 37% of the students are low income as measured by eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch. The school struggles to achieve adequate yearly progress (AYP): In 2011, 56% and 59% of Brighton students scored proficient or above on the reading and mathematics portions of the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA), respectively. Approximately 41% of graduates go to four-year colleges and universities while another 37% attend community colleges.

The school's ELL population of approximately 190 students is also quite diverse; no single ethnicity or first language (L1) dominates. Ethnically, the ELL population is comprised of 42% Asian, 40% Black, 15% Hispanic, and 3% White. Asian students are mainly from Southeast Asia (Bangladesh and Vietnam) and South Asia (India and Pakistan) while most Black students come from West African countries, especially Liberia and Sierra Leone. The majority of ELLs are low-income students and have parents who are not college educated. As described in the next section, ELL services at this school consist of a combination of ELL language classes and sheltered instruction classes (i.e., subject matter classes specifically designed for ELLs) as well as study hall periods with access to ELL teachers.

We chose Brighton as the study site because it was "typical" (Merriam, 2009) of the kinds of public schools ELLs across the country attend. Although determining what is typical is admittedly difficult, past research suggests that ELLs (a) tend to be segregated in a relatively small number of schools, (b) attend schools that also have large representations of Black and Hispanic students, (c) are taught by relatively inexperienced and less qualified teachers, and (d) are concentrated in low-achieving schools (De Cohen, Deterding, & Clewell, 2005; Fry, 2008; García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008). Further, while some ELLs in the United States have access to bilingual education (about 13% at the high school level), the most common mode of services for middle school and high school ELLs is the combination of ELL language instruction and sheltered instruction in subject areas (Zehler et al., 2003). Brighton High School is staffed by relatively well-qualified teachers and administrators, and in this respect it is not typical of the schools that ELLs attend. In other respects, however, it fits the profile of a typical "ELL school": (a) The school has a large number of ELLs, (b) it is ethnically and linguistically highly diverse, (c) it struggles to meet the academic standards mandated by the state, and (d) its mode of servicing ELLs is through a combination of ELL language courses and sheltered subject matter courses.

Course Selection Process

Because of the size of the school, Brighton has unusually large and diverse course offerings. In each of the core subject areas (English, social

studies, mathematics, and science), a rich array of courses is available as well as different levels for the same course: remedial, regular, advanced, honors, and AP. The staff refers to remedial and regular courses as the low-track courses and the advanced, honors, and AP courses as the high-track courses. Course selection decisions are based on students' preferences, teachers' and counselors' recommendations, previous courses taken, academic performance, and test scores. The school holds two course selection days a year, one each semester, when students go around the school with their course selection cards, discussing course options for next year with their current teachers and obtaining necessary signatures and recommendations. These recommendations are reviewed by the counselors and then sent home to the students' parents. Parents have the rights to reverse the school's recommendations and request different courses for their children.

ELLs follow the same course selection process as non-ELLs, with one important difference. The ELL Department plays a central role in deciding the timing of mainstreaming ELLs. Brighton offers sheltered ELL courses in the core areas, such as ELL math, ELL physical science, ELL biology, ELL U.S. history, as well as five levels of ELL English. If their English proficiency is relatively high or once they have completed sheltered courses, ELLs are often placed in mainstream courses, starting at the remedial level. Therefore, the decision of when an ELL should be mainstreamed lies with the ELL Department; once the same student has move on to the mainstream courses, his or her course leveling within the mainstream curriculum is determined by subject matter teachers and counselors.

ELL Participant Selection

There were 49 11th-grade ELLs in the 2011–2012 academic year—far too many to follow longitudinally—and thus it was necessary to select a sample of these students for long-term observation (i.e., sampling within the case; Merriam, 2009). Since the larger project was about ELLs' transition to college, the two basic student selection criteria were: (a) that when they entered high school, they were classified as ELLs and (b) that they wanted to go to college. Beyond these basic criteria, the key selection criterion was students' academic performance. In the literature on college access and degree completion (e.g., Adelman, 2006; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Kanno & Cromley, 2013a, 2013b), academic performance has been identified as the most important predictor. Also, since tracking is supposed to group students based on ability (Hallinan, 1994), we reasoned that if tracking was working the way it was supposed to work, high-performing ELLs should be taking significantly different sets of courses than low-performing ELLs. In contrast, if they were all confined to low-track courses regardless of their academic performance, then we would have to assume that a different set of circumstances must be in place for ELLs that keep them in the low track, and it would

be our job to investigate what they might be. Thus, we took the utmost care in ensuring that a wide range of academic performance was represented in our sample.

We also initially wanted to diversify the sample in terms of SES since it too has been identified as important for college viability, although less critically so than academic performance (Adelman, 2006; Bowen, Kurzwel, & Tobin, 2005; Kanno & Cromley, 2013a). However, this was not feasible since the majority of ELLs at Brighton are low-income students: In our sample, all but one student (Erica) were low-income students. Further, at the suggestion of Mr. Woznyj, the lead ELL teacher, we included two students who had entered high school as ELLs but had already been reclassified as English proficient. Mr. Woznyj believed that reclassified students might be allowed to take higher level courses and might also have higher chances of reaching four-year colleges than those who were still in the ELL program.

We requested Mr. Woznyj's assistance in selecting and recruiting participants. As the head of the ELL Department, he had a close knowledge of the target student population. At the beginning of the fieldwork, Kanno discussed the objectives of the research project and selection criteria with him. Based on this conversation, Mr. Woznyj developed an initial list of 16 potential participants. Through information sessions after school and approaching students individually, Kanno interviewed 11 of the students on the list and ultimately chose 8 of them as participants.

The final sample of eight participants included those ELLs whom Mr. Woznyj vouched for as high academic performers (Erica and Alexandra), those who were seriously at risk (Eddie and Carlos), as well as those in the middle range (Ken, Josephine, Sam, and Kadi). Their range was reflected in their cumulative GPAs as well: from 90% (Erica) to 57% (Carlos; see Table 1) based on 70% as the minimum passing grade. The length of residence in the United States ranged from nine years (Sam) to two years (Erica and Ken): Josephine and Kadi had already exited the ELL program. Ethnically, three students were African, four Hispanic (one from Spain and three from South America), and one Asian. An equal number of female and male students were included in the sample. As discussed previously, less diversity in terms of family income and parental education was represented among the eight students. Erica was the only student in the sample who came from a middle-class family and had college-educated parents.

Data Collection

Student Interviews and Classroom Observations

Once selected, each ELL participant was interviewed six times at regular intervals between the spring of their junior year and their scheduled graduation in June 2012. Interviews lasted about 30 to 40 minutes and took place during the students' study hall periods or after school. The interview focused on

Table 1
Summary of Students' Background and Their Test Scores

Students	Gender	Language Status	Native Country	L1	Age of Arrival	Length of Residence	ACCESS ^a	GPA (%)	PSSA Read ^b	PSSA Math
Erica	F	ELL	Spain	Spanish	16	2	4.9	90.2	Below basic	Proficient
Alexandra	F	ELL	Dominican Republic	Spanish	15	3	4.8	89.5	Basic	Below basic
Ken	M	ELL	Philippines	Tagalog	15	2	5.2	89.2	Basic	Below basic
Josephine	F	Reclassified	Ghana	Twi	14	3	4.8	86.2	Basic	Basic
Sam	M	ELL	Liberia	English	9	9	5.2	82.5	Basic	Basic
Kadi ^c	F	Reclassified	Guinea	Mandingo	12	6	N/A	82.3	Basic	Below basic
Eddie	M	ELL	Mexico	Spanish	14	3	3.1	72.3	Below basic	Below basic
Carlos ^d	M	ELL	Ecuador	Spanish	10	7	5.1	57.1	—	—

Note. The participants are listed in the order of high to low cumulative high school GPAs. L1 = first language; F = female; M = male; ELL = English language learner.

^aACCESS: Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for English Language Learners, the English proficiency assessment administered to ELLs every year in Pennsylvania.

^bPSSA: Pennsylvania System of School Assessment, the state assessment in Pennsylvania.

^cKadi was an ELL at her previous high school in Minnesota but had already exited the ELL program by the time she arrived at Brighton in Grade 10. She did not have to take the ACCESS test.

^dCarlos missed taking the PSSA in 11th grade, and therefore his PSSA scores are not available.

ELLs' experiences in their coursework, the progress so far made in college planning, and changes over time in their postsecondary education plans.

Kanno also observed each student three or four times in his or her classes during the data collection period. The purpose of these observations was two-fold: (a) to observe the students' participation in their classes and (b) to examine the instruction that took place in those classes. In addition, an analysis of the ELLs' course rosters early in the data collection period made it obvious that our participants were confined to low-track courses. Thus, during the second half of the data collection, Kanno began observing high-track courses to examine what type of learning took place in the classes to which our ELL participants had no access. Handouts distributed during the observed classes were collected and filed together with the observation notes. In all, 37 classes were observed.

Staff Interviews

Four ELL teachers, the district ELL coordinator, the school principal, three guidance counselors (including the director of counseling), and the college and career coordinator were each interviewed once. These formal interviews lasted 45 minutes to 90 minutes and involved conversations about their views on ELL education at Brighton, the challenges ELLs faced in their transition to college, and the procedures for course selection. In addition to these formal interviews, during the fieldwork, Kanno had repeated informal conversations with those staff members who emerged as key informants: Mr. Woznyj, Mr. Burke, the director of counseling, and Ms. Vaughn, the district ELL coordinator. Also, classroom observations often afforded opportunities to speak briefly with classroom teachers. During those brief conversations, teachers often made comments about ELLs' performance in their classes and/or what they thought about having ELLs in their classes. These comments were recorded in the field notes together with the observations of the classes.

Document Collection

The eight ELL participants' high school transcripts, PSSA (state test) scores in 11th grade, and ACCESS (Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for English Language Learners; English proficiency test) scores were obtained from the school (see Table 1). Demographic information about the ELLs was provided by Ms. Vaughn, and rosters of AP courses were provided by Mr. Burke. Other miscellaneous information about the school was gathered from the school and district websites and, if necessary, from Mr. Burke.

Data Analysis

Erickson (1986) reminds us that the development of assertions should begin during the fieldwork. Early development of assertions allows the

collection of additional data to confirm or disconfirm the assertions. In this study, most of the assertions about the practices and processes that led to ELLs' limited course access were initially developed during the fieldwork and were discussed with key participants. Additional data were collected to verify the assertions as needed.

Once the fieldwork was completed, both authors read the data multiple times and together developed an initial codebook to apply to the data. Kangas coded the data first, adding new codes to the code set as necessary (Saldaña, 2013); Kanno then reviewed and adjusted the coding. The use of qualitative data analysis software, ATLAS.ti (version 6), facilitated the sharing of data between the two authors. Once all the data were coded in this manner, the codes were further grouped together according to the emerging assertions to which they pertained (Erickson, 1986): For example, all the codes associated with the assertion "Established course sequences keep ELLs from reaching high-track courses by 12th grade" were grouped together. We then combed through these thematic units in order to evaluate the veracity of our assertions. At this stage, we deliberately sought disconfirming evidence and considered alternative explanations to the ones we thought were promising (Erickson, 1986).

In what follows, we first present the eight ELLs' course-taking patterns at Brighton. This analysis shows that regardless of their academic performance, the ELLs were largely confined to low-track courses. We then present the factors that led to the participants' low tracking in terms of the research questions we asked at the beginning of the study.

ELLs' Low Tracking

Our ELL participants together represented a large spectrum of academic performance. Yet, an analysis of their transcripts showed that regardless of academic levels, they were confined largely to ELL courses and low-track courses. With the exception of Erica and Alexandra, both Spanish L1 speakers who took AP Spanish, none of the students took high-track courses (see Table 2). Having exited the ELL program did not seem to have any effect on access to high-track courses either, because neither Josephine nor Kadi took any such courses. Higher performing students took more regular-level courses than lower performing students, but the variation was confined within the low track.

Two interpretations were possible for this pattern. One was that this pattern of low-track course-taking among our participants was a reflection of the course-taking patterns of Brighton's ELLs in general. But the other possibility was that this pattern obtained only by chance: that is, we happened to choose those ELLs who took low-track courses. In order to test these two interpretations, we examined the percentage of 12th graders in the school who took at least one AP course in academic year 2011–2012 and compared it to the rates of ELL and reclassified ELL 12th graders who took at least one AP in the same year. We need to note here that it was not so much how many

Table 2
Participants' Course-Taking Patterns

Students	GPA (%)	ELL		Low Track		High Track		
		Language ^a	Sheltered ^b	Remedial	Regular	Advanced	Honors	AP ^c
Erica	90.2	4	2	5	8	0	0	1
Alexandra	89.5	5	2	5	3	0	0	1
Ken	89.2	7	3	7	2	0	0	0
Josephine	86.2	5	3	14	2	0	0	0
Sam	82.5	0	0	16	7	0	0	0
Kadi	82.3	1	0	8	0	0	0	0
Eddie	72.3	8	8	9	1	0	0	0
Carlos	57.1	5	0	21	1	0	0	0

Note. Only core courses (English, social studies, mathematics, and science) and foreign language courses are included in the table. The number of courses each student took is not uniform for the following reasons: (a) Some students moved into the school in the middle of high school and only the courses that they took at this school are included in the table, and (b) some students failed some courses and repeated courses are counted twice. ELL = English language learner.

^aELL language courses include ELL English, ELL reading, and ELL language arts.

^bELL sheltered courses include ELL physical science, ELL biology, ELL U.S. history, and ELL global studies.

^cThe AP course that Erica and Alexandra took was AP Spanish.

ELLs took AP courses per se that was important; rather, we examined AP course-taking patterns because who takes AP courses in 12th grade is a direct indication of who has access to high-track courses *before* 12th grade.

The result showed a stark contrast. Of all Brighton's seniors, 15.2% took at least one AP course. Some took three or four AP courses at the same time. In contrast, none of the 46 ELL seniors took AP courses, except for two Spanish L1 speakers and two French L1 speakers who took AP Spanish and AP French, respectively. Reclassified ELLs did not fare much better: Among the 15 reclassified ELL seniors, only one student took an AP course (AP Computer Science). Based on this analysis, we conclude that the low-track course-taking pattern that we observed among our participants was a reflection of the larger pattern among ELLs at Brighton. In the next three sections we outline the institutional mechanisms, the staff's assumptions and practices, and students' and their parents' reactions that together led to ELLs' limited curricular access.

Institutional Mechanisms Leading to ELLs' Limited Curricular Access

In addressing our first research question, we identified a few institutional mechanisms that limited ELLs' curricular access. One mechanism

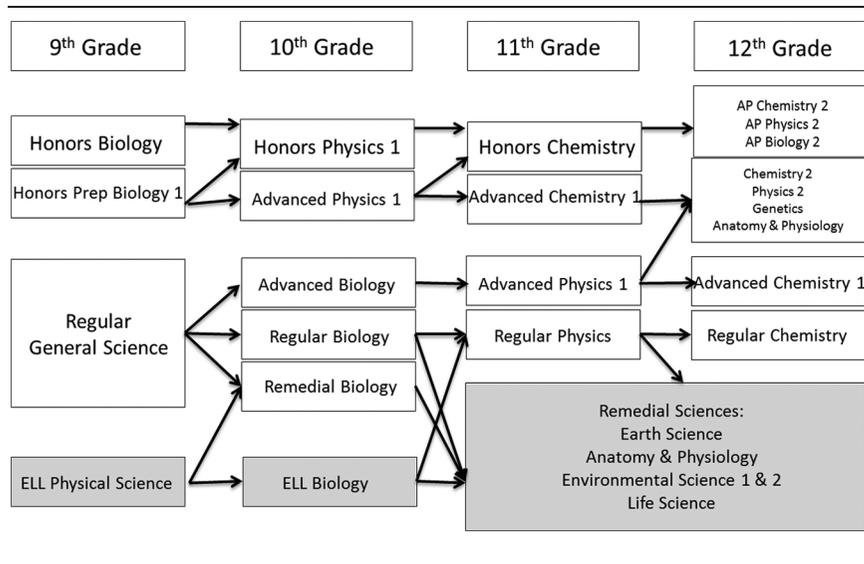


Figure 1. Course sequences for science.

Note. Arrows represent normal course pathways. The shaded area represents the most common course selections for English language learners (ELLs).

was the established course sequences in each of the core subject areas. At Brighton, each subject area department presented a chart of appropriate course and leveling sequences (see Figure 1 for the chart of science course sequences as an example). Both teachers and guidance counselors usually referred to these sequences in recommending students' courses for the next year unless they saw compelling reasons to make exceptions. In other words, these sequences represented the default academic trajectories for the majority of students from course to course.

On these charts, ELL courses fed into non-ELL, remedial-level courses of the same subject matter. For example, ELLs taking ELL physical science in 9th grade would take ELL biology in 10th grade, and then in 11th and 12th grade, they would typically choose from a pool of several non-ELL, remedial-level science courses such as earth science, environmental science, or life science (Figure 1). This course sequence would partially explain why even reclassified ELLs rarely reached high-track courses: They were ELLs at the beginning of high school and therefore started in ELL classes and proceeded on to remedial classes. In contrast, students who were slated to take AP courses in 11th and 12th grade were groomed from the start of high school through placement in advanced- and honors-level classes.

In principle, an ELL could progress from an ELL course to an AP course by his or her senior year by advancing one level each year, and this type of

progression did occasionally happen. However, it was so rare that counselors could count the individual cases in the past five years on one hand. The more usual pattern was that once placed in remedial-level classes, ELLs adjusted their expectations and lost the high motivation they might have had originally. Indeed, through our observations, we came to appreciate how challenging it would be to sustain one's academic motivation in remedial and even regular classes since these classes were filled with behavioral issues and off-task activities. In Sam's remedial life science class, for example, one student cried hysterically in class about her failing grade while shortly later another student proceeded to curse at the general and special education teachers in the classroom. While the teachers tended to these outbursts, instruction for other students was put on hold. In other remedial classes, we observed students storming out of the classroom, breaking into a song, getting up and dancing in unison, refusing to do the task, and sleeping through the entire class. Typically, ELLs did not participate in the banter; they were generally on task and tended to remain quiet.³ However, these classes were not conducive to sustaining one's motivation, to say the least. Mr. Woznyj lamented that over the years he had witnessed many ELLs losing their drive as they made a transition from ELL sheltered classes to mainstream remedial classes. Taking one of our ELL participants, Josephine, as an example, he explained:

Josephine was a reader in my classroom and had a real love for education. . . . And I said, "This is a girl who could succeed working the right way." And she had the work ethic. But, when you put her in, even a regular-level class in this building where just behavior and attitude towards education is so different than even [in] ELL [classes], I see the students change. You know, I see them become more—my joke is that they're Americanized now or Brighton-ized.

Those ELLs who transferred into Brighton in the middle of high school had even more limited chances to reach high-track classes because of their shorter tenure at Brighton. Ken, who emigrated from the Philippines in 10th grade, had strong aspirations to major in nursing in university. Given his chosen major, taking science at an advanced level in high school would have been desirable. However, upon his arrival in 10th grade, he was placed in ELL physical science (in which he earned 91%), from which he proceeded to take remedial biology in 11th grade. Regardless of his performance and motivation, it would have been impossible for Ken to jump from remedial biology in 11th grade to honors biology, honors chemistry, or honors physics in 12th grade (see Figure 1)—unless he together with his parents had insisted on jumping tracks, which, as we will discuss in the following, ELLs and their parents rarely did. Erica also arrived in 10th grade and encountered similar structural barriers. Among the eight participants, she took the highest level math course, regular-level college Algebra, in 12th

grade, finishing the course with a grade of 98%. However, given the strict tracking in math, she could not have taken a higher level math course. In order to take the next higher level course, advanced precalculus, Erica would have needed to take advanced Algebra 2 in 11th grade, which in turn required advanced geometry in 10th grade. Since Erica instead started with regular Algebra 1 and regular geometry in 10th grade, she could not have progressed to advanced Algebra 2 in 11th grade.

Another institutional mechanism that inhibited ELLs' access to high-track classes was the criteria for placing students in high-track courses. At Brighton, high-track courses, especially honors and AP courses, were intended for students who demonstrated "very strong reading and communication (written and verbal) skills" and "Advanced or Proficient PSSA scores." Like many public high schools nationwide, Brighton regularly administered a battery of standardized tests to its students. The state's standardized assessment, the PSSA, was administered in the spring of 11th grade, and 4 Sight Benchmark, which was aligned with the content and format of the PSSA, was administered four times a year. High-track classes were intended for students who had demonstrated advanced academic performance on these tests. However, ELLs tended to score basic or below basic on the PSSA since scoring at least basic was one of the criteria for exiting the ELL program. As Table 1 shows, regardless of their cumulative GPAs, many of the ELL participants scored basic or below basic on the PSSA. Thus, ELLs, by definition, were not yet at the stage of their linguistic development that would allow them to achieve proficient or advanced on the PSSA; yet this was an important criterion to place students in high-track courses at Brighton. In addition, the emphasis on strong reading and communication skills also disadvantaged ELLs because, as Mr. Burke noted, "Some teachers might say, 'OK. Well, this ELL is still developing reading and communication skills in English. So, therefore, I'm going to put him in remedial.'" In other words, as long as students had not exited the ELL program and still carried the institutional label *ELL*, it marked them as not possessing the requisite linguistic capital for taking high-track courses and justified placing them in low-track courses.

Protecting ELLs

With regard to our second research question, our analysis suggests that teachers and counselors were inclined to steer ELLs away from high-track courses in the name of "protecting ELLs." The most frequent reason cited for avoiding placing ELLs in high-level courses was the sheer amount of reading and writing that was expected in these courses. Teachers and counselors feared that the reading and writing demands of the high-track courses would overwhelm ELLs. Mrs. Salomon, a guidance counselor, explained the difficulty of managing high-track coursework as an ELL: "If it's not your

native language and you're just learning it, I think it would be really hard to, you know, read five chapters a night." Similarly, Mr. Woznyj also commented that the main reason for not placing ELLs in the high-track courses was "the reading and writing involved in those courses." He added, "We're reading the *Scarlet Letter* and you're reading 50 pages a night, and then you're writing not five-paragraph essays; you're writing kind of more sophisticated essays."

A second rationale cited for shielding ELLs from high-track courses was the lack of differentiated instruction for multiple levels of students in high-track courses. Mrs. Hernandez, another counselor, explained that the range of abilities present in high-track courses was much narrower than that in low-track courses. She said that high-track teachers expected their students to be capable, motivated, and independent learners who were willing to manage heavy volumes of reading and writing outside class and made few accommodations for anyone else. The fear of placing ELLs in high-level courses was that they would not receive necessary linguistic scaffolding in such a fast-paced, demanding environment. Mrs. Hernandez elaborated,

When you consider that they [ELLs] may need that extra assistance, let's say with the English and things like that, I think they find better support at the regular level where they're not expected to do or understand everything on their own.

While counselors like Mrs. Hernandez believed that high-track courses did not provide sufficient accommodations for ELLs, the district ELL coordinator, Ms. Vaughn, observed that accommodations were in short supply in Brighton High School across all levels. Ms. Vaughn argued, "I found in general, our ELL teachers, regular ed. teachers at elementary level and even at middle school level are much more welcoming to the students and are happier to make accommodations and modifications and include them." She continued, "Our high school teachers kind of feel like, well, you know, I'm the senior class, and, well, I teach only seniors. I don't teach freshman and I can't do things differently and this is how I run my class." Our own classroom observations corroborated her claim. Across all levels of class, there was very little evidence of differentiated instruction. Simply put, in any given class, all students were expected to learn the same material at the same pace. Thus, it was not so much that high-track courses allowed fewer accommodations than low-track courses; rather, the difference was that low-track courses featured step-by-step instruction and a slower pace of learning *for everyone* whereas high-track courses involved a faster pace of instruction and higher expectations.

The problem with the discourse of "protecting ELLs," then, is that it attributed ELLs' limited access to high-track courses to their own lack of linguistic and cultural capital. The source of the deficit was located within the

students themselves. By stating that ELLs were better off not being placed in high-track courses because these courses were for students who were independent and assertive learners capable of managing large amounts of reading and writing outside of class, the staff tacitly characterized ELLs as dependent and passive learners incapable of academic challenges (Lillie et al., 2012). This characterization of ELLs as unqualified once again justified their low-track placement.

Students' and Parents' Acquiescence

Finally, with respect to our third research question, we found that ELL students and parents almost always acquiesced to the school's recommendations. In this section, we first discuss how ELLs either did not know they had a say in their course selection or did not advocate for themselves to take higher courses than were assigned. We then turn to their parents and examine why the parents of ELLs also tended to simply accept the school's recommendations.

Students' Acquiescence

Strictly speaking, the school recommendations were not binding: Students and parents were able to challenge the recommendations if they so chose. As Mr. Burke attested, "If the student wants to argue for a higher level or lower level, they could make their case with the teacher. Discuss it with the teacher . . . they can convince the teacher to do that." In reality, however, few ELLs "made their case" to be placed in higher courses than recommended by their teachers. Mr. Woznyj could not recall a single instance of an ELL making such a request.

When we asked our ELL participants why they did not request higher level courses, the most common reactions were a shrug or a simple, "I didn't think about it." When probed further, some students indicated that they did not know that they had a say in the matter or that they simply accepted the courses that were recommended on their rosters. Ken claimed, "Only electives, you can only pick electives." Alexandra explained, "[My counselor] say[s] that these classes are good to take for me right now," and therefore it had not occurred to her to request alternative courses. Alexandra also added that while her parents were supportive of her college aspirations, they could not offer any concrete guidance about appropriate course selection because "they don't know anything" about college planning in the United States.

Mr. Woznyj believed that ELLs' lack of self-advocacy in course selection derived from their limited sense of what they were entitled to—in other words, their habitus. ELLs at Brighton tended to assume that many opportunities were beyond their reach. Referring to the numerous scholarships that Brighton offered to its graduating class as an example, Mr. Woznyj explained,

I think [ELLs] also sometimes feel like certain things are not available to them, being new to the country, where there's certain things they can't do. I get a lot of questions 'cause I have seniors [who ask] now about, "Can I get this?" or "Can I get that?" in terms of the scholarship meeting they just had.

That is, instead of automatically assuming that they would be eligible for most scholarships, ELLs began with the assumption that most likely they were *not* eligible. Habitus "involves an unconscious calculation of what is possible, impossible, and probable for individuals in their specific location in a stratified order" (Swartz, 1997, pp. 106–107). If ELLs' diminished habitus conveys to them that opportunities such as merit scholarships and high-track courses lie outside the realm of "what is possible" for them, it makes sense that they eliminate themselves from them even before they have a chance to be denied.

ELLs' lack of self-confidence may also have been a factor in their reluctance to ask for a higher placement. Erica had some awareness of the student's say in the course selection process, and given her high GPA in many courses and her placement in AP Spanish, she was in a prime position to petition for higher level courses. However, when asked why she did not request high-track courses, perhaps another AP class, she said, "I'm not going to be, like, for the AP," meaning that she did not consider herself to be a candidate for AP courses. Both Mr. Woznyj and Mrs. Hernandez observed that Erica suffered from a lack of self-confidence, which prevented her from pursuing academic challenges more aggressively. Mrs. Hernandez commented, "With Erica, too, I think it's a confidence thing. And understanding that she can do other things, and that's come through with course selection." We agree with their assessment of Erica's lack of self-confidence and its impact on her reluctance to pursue academic challenges. However, we also argue that it would be simplistic to attribute her lack of self-confidence only to her personality. It is important to remember that all of our ELL participants spent the majority of their school time in low-track classes, which have deleterious effects on students' sense of self-confidence. As Gándara and Garfield (2012) point out, "Those students who are consigned to the remedial or non-college preparatory courses come to see themselves as less capable and not 'college material' irrespective of their actual talents or abilities" (p. 12). It is thus not entirely surprising that Erica saw her placement in AP Spanish as an anomaly in her course schedule, due entirely to her being a Spanish L1 speaker, rather than an indication that she might do well in other high-track courses too. In other words, although it would be easy to blame ELLs for their own self-elimination, we need to consider the position they were assigned within the school from which they perceived their chances.

In this context, it is illuminating to point out that at the end of high school, when students had gone through college applications and realized

the impact of low tracking on their postsecondary options, some ELLs regretted not having pursued higher level courses more aggressively. Erica, who decided to attend a local community college without even applying to any four-year institution, commented, "What I saw is like people that have AP classes, like they get being accepted in college. Um, they get scholarships. So [if I were to go back and start high school all over again,] I will go back and do that, like take AP." Similarly, Ken, who applied to several area nursing programs but was rejected by them all, lamented, "I feel like I took classes that haven't reached my expectations 'cause I didn't really need some of my classes." He concluded, "I just wish that [I had] the opportunity to be more ready, you know." We were glad that at least some ELLs learned the importance of advocating for themselves at this point in their education, but they certainly paid a high price for the lesson.

Parents' Acquiescence

Like ELLs, the parents of ELLs also rarely contested the school's course recommendations despite the school policy that if the parents insisted, the school would have to honor their requests. Some non-ELL parents did on occasion make such requests, but not the parents of ELLs: Most ELL parents simply accepted the school's course recommendations.

One of the fundamental conditions of "parental involvement" or "parental intervention" is that the parents are physically present in the students' lives. But that was not always the case with our participants. Out of the eight students, only three (Ken, Carlos, and Alexandra) were living with both of their biological parents. Three others (Sam, Erica, and Josephine) were living with just one parent, and the remaining two (Eddie and Kadi) were living with other relatives. Eddie, who reported a good relationship with his uncle and his family, nonetheless observed that living with a relative was not the same as living with one's own parents:

Sometimes it's just hard for me 'cause I got too much things on my head 'cause, besides, well, I'm not living with my par—, well I'm not living with my parents. So it's kind of difficult for me to be, be focus on something like school or [pause] I mean, it's mostly myself that I got, um, that I gotta think about, like, my own.

Even those students who were living with one or both of their parents sometimes experienced prolonged parental absence as the persistent recession forced them to spend extended periods of time away from home in order to make a living. Carlos's father was away in New York for his construction job while the son was cutting school for most of his senior fall semester. Josephine's single mother was away for a month at a time for her home-care job while Josephine was making important college decisions. In other words, our participants' parents were not always in a position to be able

to monitor their children's academic progress closely or to take the time to familiarize themselves with the intricacies of course sequencing in U.S. schools and their consequences for postsecondary education opportunities.

Coming from a single-parent household or even living with relatives was not necessarily a unique characteristic of ELLs, but rather a common situation with Brighton students. Parental participation in school activities and events, such as College Awareness Night and Financial Aid Workshop, was very low. However, if both ELL and non-ELL parents stayed away from the school, the counselors observed, they stayed away for different reasons: Working-class, non-ELL parents avoided contact because of their own negative experiences as students; ELL parents, on the other hand, were reluctant to come to the school because of the language barrier and lack of familiarity. Knowing those barriers to ELL parents' participation, the school had made some efforts to encourage ELL parents to come to the school by providing translators, offering adult ELL classes, and holding small ELL parent-specific workshops. The reception among the ELL parents for these accommodations was positive. Mrs. Hernandez said, "They're very grateful, you know, relieved when they can come in and have someone translate and say, 'OK. I can be understood.'" However, if ELL parents were "grateful" for the school's accommodations and remained deferential toward the staff, they were unlikely to challenge the school's decisions.

Cultural differences in parental roles in children's school education may have also played a part in ELL parents' reluctance to interfere with the school's decisions. U.S. middle-class parents' practice of being involved in many aspects of the school's activities, closely monitoring what the school is doing to their children, and intervening at the first sign of trouble (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003) is by no means universally shared. In many parts of the world from which immigrants come, school education is regarded as the responsibility of the school professionals, and to interfere with the school business is a sign of disrespect (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008; Guo, 2006). The first-generation immigrant parents of ELLs at Brighton may have been following these original cultural expectations in their dealings with the school.

Our student participants all said that their parents and guardians were strongly supportive of their education and wanted them to attend college. Even Carlos, who was at a serious risk of dropping out, was acutely aware that his parents wanted him to do well in school and to go to college "cause that's why they brought us here [to the United States]." However, in most cases, ELLs' parents did not express their support in the form of active participation in the school; rather, they communicated their expectations directly to their children and expected them to defer to their teachers when in school. For example, Ken noted that his parents made it very clear to all their children that they had to go to college "because . . . they don't want us to get the things that they've been through. 'Cause they, they're

like, they been working hard.” His parents made it a point of sharing with their children the difficulties of the life of immigrants without a college degree to impress upon them the importance of education. Ken also said that his parents monitored his homework closely at home. At the same time, during our fieldwork, his parents neither contacted his guidance counselor or teachers nor participated in any of the college planning workshops at the school. That is, Ken’s parents’ guidance and support for his college planning took place strictly within their home.

In summary, given their cultural predispositions to respect the decisions of the school authorities and their appreciation of the school’s efforts to reach out to them, ELL parents were highly unlikely to overrule the course recommendations made by the school. And since ELLs themselves rarely asked for a higher level course, the school’s course recommendations almost always stood unchallenged.

Discussion

The central goal of this study was to increase our understanding of how ELLs’ access to high-track courses in high school comes to be so restricted. Through a qualitative case study of ELL education at one public high school, we identified several factors that contributed to the constraining of ELLs’ curricular choices.

First, upon completing ELL sheltered courses, ELLs at Brighton almost always exited into remedial-level courses. As a result of this course sequence, most ELLs did not have enough time to reach honors and AP courses by the end of high school. Second, ELLs are, by definition, those students whose limited English proficiency makes it difficult to achieve high scores on standardized tests. Any tests administered in English invariably confound ELLs’ English language proficiency and content knowledge (Abedi, 2004; Solano-Flores, 2008; Solórzano, 2008). However, demonstration of high achievement in standardized tests was an important criterion for high-track placement. Third, there was a general tendency on the part of teachers and administrators to steer ELLs away from challenging courses in the name of protecting ELLs. Fourth, ELL students and parents almost always acquiesced to the school’s recommendation of course offerings. Some ELLs were not even aware that they had a say in the course choice, and even when they did, they tended to self-eliminate because of a lack of confidence. Parents of ELLs were generally not sufficiently involved in their children’s schooling to be aware of the consequences of low-tracking, and their cultural practice of being deferential to school professionals may also have inclined them to accept the school’s recommendations.

Having analyzed the inner workings of our focal school, we are now in the position to compare our findings with those of past studies. As discussed earlier, Callahan et al. (2010) provided their conjectures on why ELLs are

prevented from taking high-track courses. Our findings do not lend support to their first explanation that the combination of the required ELL courses and graduation requirements leaves little room for high-level courses. Our participants, without exception, had “room” for taking several elective courses, but these slots were mostly filled with a random selection of vocational and practical courses. Counselors carefully monitored each student’s core course trajectories, but given that each counselor had 300 students in his or her caseload, less attention was paid to their elective courses, and students mostly chose their own electives, often through the word-of-mouth recommendations of their peers. Therefore, the lack of room on their roster is not a satisfactory explanation for ELLs’ limited course selection. Callahan et al.’s second explanation, that high-track teachers may be reluctant to address ELLs’ linguistic needs, may very well be true in some schools (e.g., Lillie et al., 2012). At Brighton, however, there was no evidence that high-track teachers were particularly reluctant to address ELLs’ needs and that their unwillingness to work with ELLs led to ELLs’ low tracking. Rather, the situation was the other way around. ELLs were seldom placed in high-track classes because they were deemed unqualified. Therefore, high-track teachers’ willingness to work with ELLs was rarely tested because they hardly ever received ELLs in their classes.

One interesting question to ponder is whether ELLs did not request higher level courses because they were culturally unfamiliar with the practice of negotiating with institutional agents. Although we considered this possibility, we ultimately rejected it because of counterexamples in other studies. For example, Harklau (1994a) analyzed the cases of two Chinese-ethnic ELLs who were able to negotiate high-track placements for themselves. The fact that students who originally came from Hong Kong and Taiwan successfully negotiated high-track placements for themselves in the United States, we believe, goes some distance in refuting the explanation of cultural unfamiliarity. Similarly, Kanno and Varghese (2010), in a study of immigrant ELLs of various national origins who enrolled in a selective public university, identified ELLs’ strategic negotiations with institutional agents to secure opportunities and special accommodations for themselves. This again confirms *some* ELLs’ ability to successfully navigate the system.

The difference we see between these “savvy” negotiators and our participants involves their cultural capital and habitus. Harklau (1994a) argues that in order for students to successfully challenge the school’s tracking decisions, “students had to realize that there were indeed systematic differences between classes and that there was something to be negotiated” (p. 352). Indeed, our students were generally quite vague about the levels of their courses, *and* not all of them were aware that the placements of core courses were negotiable. At the same time, we argue that such awareness alone is insufficient; in order for students to negotiate with institutional agents, their awareness must be bolstered by a sense of entitlement—or a powerful

habitus—that all the educational resources and opportunities available in the school are for their own benefit. Many ELL students in Kanno and Varghese's (2010) study came from middle-class/upper-middle-class families and/or had college-educated parents. Many also had received a high-level education in their countries of origin prior to immigration. Therefore, they had no doubt that they were as much entitled to all the resources and opportunities present in their school as anyone else. They aggressively tried to familiarize themselves with what the school had to offer, and when they did not find what they were looking for, they asked for special accommodations. Such an orientation was completely different from that exhibited by the ELLs in this study, who tended to assume, even when they were aware of the resources and opportunities present in the school, that they were not for ELLs like themselves. As Erica put it, "I'm not going to be, like, for the AP."

Although we are reasonably confident of the rigor of our analysis by having taken several measures to ensure it, such as long-term engagement in the field, triangulation among different data sources, and deliberate search for alternative explanations and disconfirming evidence (Erickson, 1986; Maxwell, 2004), there are some important limitations to this study. First, in our sample, we did not have an exceptionally achieving ELL who managed to reach high-track courses. Given that the staff confirmed that those students were few and far between, it is possible that during the fieldwork period, there was no such student. But the inclusion of such a student would have been illuminating in terms of what enables ELLs to break linguistic and structural barriers and how the staff would approach the course sequencing of such an ELL. We were also not able to gather information on how many ELLs took advanced-level and honors courses. Again, the staff confirmed that the course-taking pattern that we saw in our participants' transcripts reflected ELLs' course-taking patterns at Brighton in general. Also, the fact that so few ELLs and reclassified ELLs took AP courses suggests that few ELLs were in the pipeline. Nonetheless, it would have been helpful to determine conclusively the extent to which ELLs were represented in advanced-level and honors courses.

Further, some might argue that these ELLs had limited access to high-track courses simply because they were not academically ready. This is a possibility that is difficult to refute conclusively and is therefore another limitation of the study. GPAs, though routinely used as a measure of academic achievement, often reflect factors other than academic achievement such as attendance, work ethic, and class participation. That is why it is standard practice for statistical analysts to include other measures of academic achievement such as standardized test scores (e.g., Adelman, 2006; Callahan, Wilkinson, Muller, & Frisco, 2009). However, standardized tests are not valid measures of ELLs' academic performance because, as noted previously, they confound students' academic knowledge and English language proficiency (Abedi, 2004; Solano-Flores, 2008; Solórzano, 2008). In

short, other than GPAs, there were no readily available sources to verify the ELLs' academic levels—except for the informal evaluations of teachers, who all confirmed that students like Erica and Alexandra were high performers. On the grounds that even when ELLs earned an extremely high grade in a course they were nearly always moved to the next course of the same level, we believe that it was not primarily the lack of perceived academic readiness that kept ELLs at the same level but all the other factors that we discussed in this article.

Despite these limitations, our findings illuminate the processes through which ELLs' curricular options become severely restricted and offer important implications for ways to provide ELLs with better academic preparation for college. One obvious implication is that ELLs must be allowed to jump to higher level courses after completing the ELL sheltered courses if their academic performance warrants it. Our participants *always* transitioned from sheltered courses to the remedial-level courses of the same subjects regardless of their performance in the sheltered courses. We believe that if ELLs of high academic performance were given the opportunity to move to higher level courses immediately after sheltered courses, it would open up three new possibilities. First, it would send a powerful message to ELLs that the opportunity to learn a rigorous academic curriculum is commensurate with their performance. If ELLs knew that if they worked hard and performed well in their current courses they would be rewarded with the possibility of moving up the rank, they might sustain their original motivation. Second, if ELLs were allowed to move directly to regular- or advanced-level courses after sheltered courses, it would increase their chances of reaching high-track courses by 12th grade. Direct transition into regular- and advanced-level courses would shorten the distance between where they are and high-track courses and would substantially increase ELLs' chances of reaching advanced, honors, and even AP courses by 12th grade, especially if changing tracks was made more flexible. Third, having the opportunity to move up the ladder and to take high-track courses would raise their status in the school community and also expose ELLs to college-bound peers who know how to advocate for themselves effectively. Once placed in such an environment, ELLs might begin espousing higher aspirations and advocate for themselves more readily. Such a change, however, would be possible only if teachers are equipped with the ability to provide ELLs with the necessary linguistic scaffolding in the context of rigorous academic instruction. Arizona's extreme case of ELLs' removal from academic content while they are learning English clearly demonstrates that the sequential model of giving students English instruction first and academic content second does not work (Gándara & Orfield, 2012; Lillie et al., 2012). It simply makes ELLs fall further behind their English-proficient peers. For high school-level ELLs, language development and academic learning that prepares them for college must happen in tandem. There has been considerable progress in the development of instructional modifications for ELLs, the best known model

being the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2013). Thus, we know pedagogical strategies that can enhance ELLs' academic learning; what has been lacking is a willingness "to fully confront the types of racial, linguistic, and other institutional biases that exist within the inner workings of schools" (Rodriguez & Cruz, 2009, p. 2401). No amount of professional development on ELL instruction would be meaningful unless educators make it their *personal* responsibility to help ELLs reach high academic potential.

In conclusion, unless high school educators abandon their assumption that English proficiency must be fully in place before ELLs are ready to take high-level courses and begin offering linguistic support within the context of a rigorous academic curriculum, ELLs' underachievement will persist, not because they are incapable of learning but because they are not given the opportunity to learn. The concept of opportunity to learn suggests that students should not be held accountable for the material they have not had a chance to learn and that such a lack of opportunity to learn should not result in negative educational consequences for the students (Wang & Goldschmidt, 1999). However, this is exactly what is happening to ELLs: They are denied opportunities to take advanced college-preparatory courses, which in turn results in the lack of opportunity to receive rigorous academic preparation that will qualify them for college entrance *and* the likelihood of survival and success in college.

Notes

¹*Lau v. Nichols* (1974) is a landmark Supreme Court case that ruled that the lack of appropriate linguistic accommodations for Chinese-ethnic students with limited English proficiency in the San Francisco Unified School District constituted a violation of their civil rights because without such accommodations, students did not have access to equal educational opportunities. Four decades later, this ruling remains a critical milestone for protecting the educational rights of linguistic minority students (Hakuta, 2011).

²All names of institutions and people in this study are pseudonyms. Some characteristics that can potentially identify the school are intentionally left vague in order to protect the privacy of the people involved.

³Most emphatically, this does not mean that all of our English language learner (ELL) participants were "model minority" (Lee, 2009) students. Carlos and Eddie skipped too many classes and failed several courses, which delayed their graduation (in the case of Carlos, by more than one year). However, ELLs' resistance and lack of motivation translated more into tardiness and absences than into acting out in the classroom. Even Carlos and Eddie, when they did attend classes, readily cooperated with their teachers (see Harklau, 1994b, for examples of similar compliance among ELLs in regular classrooms).

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