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Title
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Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3px4w8k9

Journal
AAPI Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community, 8(1)

ISSN
1545-0317

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Publication Date
2010

DOI
10.36650/nexus8.1_17-42_Xiong

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aapi nexus Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring 2010): 17-42

Research Article

State-Mandated Language Classification:
A Study of Hmong American Students' Access to College-Preparatory Curricula

Yang Sao Xiong

Abstract

Language minority students, many of whom come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, confront multiple obstacles to academic success and advancement. Yet the intersection between language minority students' K-12 experiences and their potential to obtain higher education remains understudied. This paper examines how a set of institutional processes and practices—state-mandated classification, testing, and tracking—operates to systematically limit language minority students' access to college-preparatory curricula. Using data from interviews, this study investigates Hmong American high school and college students' experiences in English language development and mainstream academic tracks, as well as their perceptions regarding access to college preparatory courses. The evidence suggests that students tracked in English Language Development curricula not only have limited access to key resources, such as college preparatory courses, but also hold lower aspirations about college, compared to those who are in college preparatory tracks. The limitations of this study and implications for future research are discussed.

Introduction

Despite a growing body of research showing that methods of classifying, testing, and tracking within U.S. educational systems may result in negative consequences for racial minority students' academic opportunities and outcomes, this set of institutionalized practices and its effects on English Learners (ELs),[1] in particular, have remained understudied. EL classification practices and out-

comes often escape close scrutiny because federal and state policies regarding language minority students derive their authority from historic legal precedents such as the 1974 Supreme Court ruling of *Lau v. Nichols*. Moreover, states such as California purport to provide "appropriate educational services" and implement "objective" assessments of ELs in public schools.[2] As such, any substantive challenge to EL education policies and practices might seem to question more foundational legal precedents and basic principles for educational equity in states and school districts across the nation. The following study, nevertheless, calls into question the fairness of current language classification, testing, and tracking policies and practices — as experienced and perceived by Hmong American students from specific sites in California.

In the sections that follow, I discuss the impact of state-mandated classification, selective testing, and academic tracking on language minority students' access to college preparatory curricula and other resources. I begin by reviewing select literature on academic tracking and some of the negative consequences that tracking has for language minority students. Second, I briefly discuss the federal court case that has guided the education rights of language minority students. Then, I discuss California's policy of classifying, testing, and tracking, and its potential effects on language minority students' access to rigorous curricula and other resources. Next, I present findings from interviews with Hmong American students in a northern California school district to illustrate how these practices might be associated with individual students' perceptions about tracking and college access. This analysis shows that state education policies and practices that place ELs into non-mainstream curricula could be biased. Finally, I discuss implications of this study for future research.

Academic Tracking and Educational Outcomes

Studies have shown that institutionalized practices, such as high-stakes testing and academic tracking, have far-reaching consequences for students and their academic outcomes (Oakes, 1982; Gamoran, 1987; Hoffer, 1992; Muller and Schiller, 2000; Lucas and Good, 2001). The classification and placement of students into differentiated curricula and the self-fulfilling prophecies that result from such placement can independently determine students' immediate opportunities to learn, their motivations, and their

long-term educational trajectories (Braddock and Dawkins, 1993; Rosenbaum, 1980; Eder, 1981; Alexander, Entwisle, and Horsey, 1997). More specifically, evidence suggests that academic tracking creates unequal access to positive social circles, role models, and fully credentialed teachers (Byrne, 1988; Kubitschek and Hallinan, 1998; Rumberger, 2000; Gandara and Rumberger, 2003). Furthermore, given that academic tracking creates categories of students and reinforces assumptions that students of various categories are qualitatively different, tracking tends to result in differential teacher expectations and instruction (Oakes 1982; Vanfossen, Jones, and Spade, 1987; Kerckhoff, 2001; Vanfossen, Jones, and Spade, 1987). In addition, tracking and the consequences associated with it are closely linked to class and racial inequality (Gamoran and Mare, 1989; Ansalone, 2003). For instance, much of the research on academic tracking has found that, compared to white students, racial minority students are disproportionately placed in lower-track classes (Oakes, Gamoran, and Page, 1992).

With respect to language minority students, some have observed that ELs are more likely than English-only students to be placed in classrooms where teachers are under-credentialed and where most teachers hold "teacher in training" agreements, rather than full credentials (Rumberger, 2000; Gandara and Rumberger, 2003). This reality raises serious questions about whether ELs, including those who are U.S.-born, will receive sufficiently high quality academic instruction to graduate and gain admission to college. Despite a growth in research on language minority students in K-12 and higher education, one critical area of focus that remains understudied is the intersection between language minority students' K-12 experiences and their potential to gain higher education. To better understand the nature of this intersection, it is important to examine systems of classification, testing, and tracking in public K-12 schools that are typically imposed on language minority students from the earliest grades. By investigating how these practices operate to structure ELs' access to college preparatory curricula, this study sheds light on how tracking might influence access to college.

Historical Precedents

On January 21, 1974, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Lau v. Nichols* that schools' approach to treating English language

learners the same way as all other students is a violation of their civil rights. Acknowledging that "sink and swim" instruction diminishes their "meaningful opportunity to participate in the public educational program," the U.S. Supreme Court, for the first time, decided that ELs require special educational services. In the view of the Supreme Court, "there is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum; for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education."[3] Although it was grounded in statute (Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964), rather than in the U.S. Constitution, the *Lau v. Nichols* ruling, also referred to as *Lau Remedies*, has remained the major precedent regarding the educational rights of linguistic minority children in the U.S.

In part, such legal precedents shaped the federal *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* to require that individual states meet the specific academic needs of non-native English speaking students. Toward this end, states such as California have implemented and maintained a complex set of institutional policies and practices around language classification, testing, and tracking. Such policies and practices may not lead to accurate or fair testing and tracking, however. For instance, classification to language minority status in California, which is based exclusively on a student's primary home language, makes no distinction between students who (or whose parents) are born and raised in the United States and those who (or whose parents) are recent immigrants or refugees. Furthermore, students' scores on English proficiency tests, such as the California English Language Development Test, are often taken as objective measures of students' English ability, without questioning the reliability or validity of these instruments. Third, while state policies purport to give ELs an opportunity to transition out of remedial English Language Development (ELD) curricula, such transitions may be delayed or never occur at all due to arbitrary reclassification criteria. Thus, despite good intentions, these policies and practices might systematically deprive a great number of students classified or misclassified as ELs, including those born and raised in the U.S., of instructional opportunities with rigorous college preparatory curricula, in particular. In the next section, I focus on ELs in California and explain how the state's system of mandatory classification, testing, and tracking impacts these students' access to college-preparatory curricula.

English Learners in California

Since 1998, English Learners have consistently constituted 25 percent or more of California's public school enrollment. During 2007-08, California's Department of Education (CDE; 2008a) reported that the number of ELs enrolled in its schools totaled 1,553,091. Ninety-two percent of ELs speak one of the top five non-English languages in the state: Spanish, 85.1 percent; Vietnamese, 2.2 percent; Filipino, 1.4 percent; Cantonese, 1.4 percent; and Hmong, 1.3 percent (CDE, 2008a). An overwhelming majority of the state's ELs are racial minority students: more than 92 percent are from a Mexican/Latino or Asian background.[4]

State-Mandated Classification, Testing, and Reclassification

In 2001, in accordance with the federal *No Child Left Behind Act*, the California legislature modified the state education code (Education code 313, 60810, and 60812) and mandated the use of a "home language survey" (HLS) to identify language minority students. As a result, all public school districts must administer the HLS, which consists of *four questions*:

> (1) Which language did your son or daughter learn when he or she first began to speak?
>
> (2) What language does your son or daughter most frequently use at home?
>
> (3) What language do you use most frequently to speak to your son or daughter?
>
> (4) Name the language most often spoken by adults at home.

If a parent or adult lists a language other than English on any of these four statements, the student must take the California English Language Development Test (CELDT).[5] On the other hand, English monolingual students are exempted from the CELDT. Although both its content and implementation are simple, the Home Language Survey initiates a set of processes that could have immediate and long-term effects on language minority students' access to college preparatory curricula and accompanying resources.

The CELDT, which is not timed and lasts about two hours, tests students on different skill areas, depending on grade level. For students in kindergarten and first grade, the CELDT tests listening and speaking skills. For students in grades two through

twelve, the CELDT assesses listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills (CDE, 2004a, 3-4). There are five possible levels of English proficiency that a student can achieve on the CELDT: (1) beginning, (2) early intermediate, (3) intermediate, (4) early advanced, and (5) advanced. The State Board of Education, which establishes the cut-off points and criteria for determining English proficiency based on the CELDT, states that a student who scores at or above the "early advanced" level overall and does not score below intermediate proficiency level in any particular skill area should "probably be identified as fluent English proficient (FEP)" (CDE, 2004a, 4). Accordingly, students' CELDT results can be used to identify and classify them as EL or FEP.

If students are unable to demonstrate fluent English proficiency on the CELDT, they are placed in one of four possible instructional settings. Table 1 shows information on the types of instructional settings into which EL students have been placed since 1998. Across the board, 60 to 70 percent of EL students are not in mainstream classrooms where English language is the medium of instruction. During 2005-06, about seven percent of EL students were placed in alternative courses of study, which means they are taught English and other subjects through bilingual education techniques or other recognized methods.

California law states that school districts shall:

> [C]ontinue to provide additional and appropriate educational services to ELs in kindergarten through grade 12 for the purposes of overcoming language barriers until the English learners have: (a) demonstrated English-language proficiency comparable to that of the school district's average native English-language speakers; and (b) recouped any academic deficits which may have been incurred in other areas of the core curriculum as a result of language barriers (Code of Regulations, Title 5, §11302).

The State Board of Education establishes a set of formal criteria for the re-classification of former ELs to FEP status. Specifically, it establishes that school districts are to develop student reclassification policy and procedures based on four reclassification criteria approved by the State Board of Education (Educ. Code §313d) (CDE 2004b, iv-1). These four criteria involve: (1) a review of an individual student's results on [the] latest California English-Lan-

Table 1: Number of English Learners Enrolled in Specific Instructional Settings by Year

	1998-99 Statewide Totals (%)	2000-01 Statewide Totals (%)	2002-03 Statewide Totals (%)	2004-05 Statewide Totals (%)	2005-06 Statewide Totals (%)	2007-08 Statewide Totals (%)
(1) Mainstream Courses*	416,962 (28.9)	472,599 (31.3)	550,437 (34.4)	613,729 (38.6)	624,756 (39.8)	–
(2) Mainstream Courses* upon Parental Request	44,947 (3.1)	44,921 (3.0)	42,400 (2.7)	32,132 (2.0)	31,901 (2.0)	–
(3) Structured English Immersion	702,592 (48.7)	720,948 (47.7)	773,132 (48.3)	755,137 (47.4)	737,243 (46.9)	755,966 (48.7)
(4) Alternative Courses of Study	179,334 (12.4)	181,455 (12.0)	153,029 (9.6)	120,849 (7.6)	105,833 (6.7)	–
(5) Other Instructional Settings	98,857 (6.9)	91,376 (6.0)	80,544 (5.0)	69,678 (4.4)	70,721 (4.5)	–
Total # of ELs	1,442,692	1,511,299	1,599,542	1,591,525	1,570,454	1,553,091

*Refers to regular courses where English is the medium of instruction.
-- No data available.
Source: California Department of Education, 2008.

guage Arts Standards Test (ELA CST); (2) review of the student's CELDT results from [the] annual assessment; (3) teacher's evaluation of the student's academic performance; and (4) parent opinion and consultation (CDE, 2004b, iv1-iv3). This means that ELs should be transferred from a Structured English Immersion Program to a Mainstream English Language Program when they have acquired a "good working knowledge"[6] of English and satisfied all reclassification criteria.

Despite the reported increase in the percentage of EL students scoring at or above advancing since 2001, only a small percentage of EL students has been reclassified to FEP status. As Table 2 shows, during each of the past ten years, less than 10 percent of EL students were reclassified.[7] Because the CELDT is the primary instrument used to determine students' "proficiency" in English, one would expect that as EL students' CELDT scores increase, the

rate at which they become redesignated to FEP status should also increase.[8] However, the percentage of EL students reclassified has increased by only one percent while the percentage of students meeting English proficiency status increased about 23 percent between 2001 and 2004.[9] The evidence that over 90 percent of EL students consistently do not become reclassified raises serious questions about current reclassification criteria and decision-making.

Table 2: Percent Distribution of EL Students, FEP Students, and Redesignated FEP Students in California, 1998-2008

Year	CA Total K-12 Enrollment	# of EL Students	# of FEP Students	# of Students Redesig-nated as FEP
		(% of Enrollment)	(% of Enrollment)	(% of Previous Yr EL)
2007-08	6,275,469	1,553,091	1,176,151	150,573
		24.7%	18.7%	9.6%
2006-07	6,286,943	1,568,738	1,148,938	144,901
		25.0%	18.3%	9.2%
2005-06	6,312,436	1,570,424	1,123,954	152,911
		24.9%	17.8%	9.6%
2004-05	6,322,167	1,591,525	1,064,578	143,136
		25.2%	16.8%	9.0%
2003-04	6,298,774	1,598,535	999,690	133,214
		25.4%	15.9%	8.3%
2002-03	6,244,642	1,599,542	931,869	120,122
		25.6%	14.9%	7.7%
2001-02	6,147,375	1,559,248	878,139	117,450
		25.4%	14.3%	7.8%
2000-01	6,050,895	1,511,299	844,387	133,964
		25.0%	14.0%	9.0%
1999-00	5,951,612	1,480,527	791,283	112,214
		24.9%	13.3%	7.8%
1998-99	5,844,111	1,442,692	758,363	106,288
		24.7%	13.0%	7.6%

Source: California Department of Education, 2008.

Moreover, current state law presents yet another dilemma for EL students: an EL student may be "re-enrolled in a structured English immersion program" if he or she "has not achieved a reasonable level of English proficiency."[10] This means that an EL student could be considered proficient in English at one point in time, then be deemed not proficient in English at a later period.

If over 90 percent of the state's EL student population are not ever re-designated and certain opportunities for advanced learning, furthermore, are not provided in programs serving ELs, what consequences could these circumstances have for the future learning of students designated as EL? Even though California's use of the Home Language Survey to identify non-native English speakers for English proficiency testing and curriculum placement appears well-intentioned, it might systematically disadvantage language minority students. The HLS usually escapes close scrutiny because the underlying assumption of the state education system is that "language identification" for the purpose of curriculum placement benefits or serves the vast majority of language minority students. However, it could also be argued that language classification is a form of linguistic profiling, and that its presumed benefits to language minority students should not be taken as a given. Once language minority students are linguistically profiled, they are required to prove English proficiency on the state's English proficiency test. Given existing reclassification criteria, many students who are classified as ELs might then become trapped in remedial tracks. In the next section, I present findings that highlight one apparent major consequence of EL tracking for Hmong American students: their lack of access to college preparatory curricula. I also discuss differences in EL and non-EL students' aspirations for higher education.

Hmong American Students from a Northern California School District

Given the aggregate nature of the Department of Education's public data that prevents the disclosure of individual-level data, my examination of such data is limited here to descriptive analyses only. Furthermore, few school districts collect data on either ELs' enrollment in college preparatory curricula or their level of college attendance. Thus, it is extremely difficult to establish a clear relationship between classification into EL status and the level of

access to college preparatory curricula. Alternatively, qualitative data can shed some light on how students in specific school contexts perceive their status as ELs and how they experience access (or lack thereof) to college-preparatory curricula. I turn to this issue in the next section by examining findings from in-depth interviews with eleven Hmong American students.

Method and Data

Between September and December of 2008, I recruited and interviewed eleven Hmong students in northern California. Rather than recruiting the first research participant formally through official school channels, I identified the subject informally through social networks of friends and relatives. My assumption was that such a community-based approach might enable informants to express their stories, experiences, and perceptions more comfortably than one mediated by school personnel. Then, because I was interested in describing how Hmong American students experienced and perceived tracking and access to college preparatory curricula within their localized settings, and did not intend to look for causal links or associations between variables, I resorted to a non-random, snowball sampling technique to recruit additional interviewees. After interviewing my initial participant, I asked her to suggest friends, family members, or relatives who were attending or had recently graduated from the same high school or another high school in the same school district. Although my sample of informants is not representative of those Hmong American students who currently attend or have graduated from this public school district within the past five years, informants' responses shed light on some of the shared experiences that Hmong American EL and non-EL students have encountered with respect to academic tracking and aspirations about college during the past decade.

All 11 participants, who identified themselves as Hmong or Hmong American, were asked to participate because they have attended public schools within the same northern California school district and have been exposed to the system of academic classification and tracking at this district. Of the 11 individuals, six were EL or former EL students and five have never been classified as EL. Of the six EL students, three were born in the U.S. and the other three were born in Thailand but arrived between ages ten and fourteen. The four female students (of whom two are foreign

born) in the group are between 18 and 29 years-old; and the seven male students (of whom two are foreign born) are between 18 and 32 years old. Of the four informants born outside of the U.S. (Mai Vang, Fong, Lue, and Thai), all were born in Thailand and grew up in refugee camps, such as Camp Nam Yao and Ban Vinai. They and their families came to the U.S. with refugee status between 1987 and 1992. When they arrived, they were between 7 (Mai Vang) and 16 years old (Lue). Of the seven informants born in the U.S. (Thao, Shoua, Mandy, Steven, Hlee, Pao, and Kong), all were born and raised in California with parents who are former refugees from Laos or Thailand. Four students are high school seniors, two graduated from high school and are working full-time (not attending college), and five are currently attending a public college or have recently graduated from one. My informants came from households with an average family size of six that typically included two parents and unmarried school-age children.

All interviews took place at informants' homes and lasted from one to three hours, excluding follow-up interviews. All of the informants spoke Hmong and English, and frequently code-switched between languages. Furthermore, they were articulate in their ideas and explanations of the problems that they and their peers experienced in school. Other family members were usually present during my interviews with the informants, but we rarely encountered interruptions. During the semi-structured interviews, I asked each participant about their academic experiences, coursework, school environment, educational and career goals, knowledge about colleges, family obligations, work experience, and non-school activities from their elementary years (or pre-migration schooling) through to high school. In the next section, I briefly describe the school district context and then discuss Hmong American students' reported experiences with academic tracking and their access to college-preparatory curricula.

Public School District Context

The informants' school district has two main high schools, five middle schools, and fourteen elementary schools serving approximately 10,000 students. About 44 percent of the students are white, 32 percent are Hispanic, 12 percent are Asian American, 6 percent are Native American, 4 percent are African American, and 2 percent are classified as multiracial. In 2007, 75 percent of the stu-

dents in the district received free or reduced lunch and 25 percent were classified as ELs. The county's two largest non-English speaking groups are Spanish (59%) and Hmong (34%).

Twenty-one percent of the district's graduating seniors met the requirements for admission into either the University of California or California State University, compared to the state's 38 percent (CDE, 2008b). Given the lack of specific data on ELs, let alone ELs of Hmong background, it is not known which percentage of them graduate and meet the requirements for the UCs or CSUs. Within the class of 2008, about 68 percent of ELs graduated from high school, compared to 80 percent of all students in the same school district.[11] The school district has written policies that define how schools and school personnel should classify, test, reclassify, and structure curricula for language minority students. In general, the form and content of these policies are consistent with comparable statewide policies on the identification, testing, and placement of language minority students.

Perceptions of Tracking in High School and Access to College Preparatory Curricula

In their early years, informants who were classified as EL report developing an awareness of two distinct categories of students: those who are like them and those who are "smarter" than them. This distinction is reified and exacerbated as Hmong American students become placed in remedial tracks or college-preparatory and advanced tracks. Students' placement in these different tracks and the difficulty in transitioning out of a track appear to be associated with differential access to college preparatory curricula. On one hand, students in remedial tracks gain very little exposure to college-level work or feel ill-equipped for college. On the other, students in college preparatory tracks know more about the expectations of college and are more optimistic about their chances of attaining a higher education. Although I recognize that not all Hmong American students begin K-12 with the same set of resources or are equally likely to pursue college, the experiences of students in my sample suggest that their placement into different academic tracks may not be an open, accessible process. Given many Hmong American students' low SES and their parents' low formal education, these students are typically left to deal with the education system or gatekeepers on their own.

Tracked from an Early Age

Informants reported that they developed an awareness of at least two distinct "kinds" of students as they progressed through their school years: (1) those who were like them and took similar classes and (2) those who were "smarter" and taking classes different from their own. For example, Fong (all names herein are pseudonyms), who arrived in the U.S. at age ten and is now thirty-one-years old, recalls, "I could tell who were the smarter students. They [Hmong] took pre-algebra in eighth grade when my friends and me were only taking regular math. In ninth grade, they were already taking Algebra One while we were in 'Math A' [a regular math course below pre-Algebra]." Like Fong, many informants were fully aware that some students took English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, which were different from "regular" English courses. They understood that ESL courses were for "*cov tsis txawj ntawv Miskas*" (those who are not good at [written] English).

Within the school district, the most common pathway leading to an academic track in ninth grade is based on taking math and English placement tests. All but two informants took English and math placement exams in eighth grade. Two individuals did not take the placement exam because they started in ninth grade when they first arrived in the United States from Thailand. Most of the students believed that their high schools used their eighth grade exam scores to determine which English and math classes to place them in at the beginning of ninth grade.[12] Thao, for instance, recalls:

> My eighth grade teachers told us that depending on how well we do on that test, [the high school] would decide which English and math classes to put us in freshman year. …
>
> Interviewer: During freshmen year, did you or your friends get put in classes that you didn't expect?
>
> Thao: No, not really; I kind of, already, expected to get into Algebra One because I was taking pre-algebra when I was in eighth grade. … At that time, I had older cousins at [high school], so I asked [them] about which electives to take [during freshmen year], but eventually most of us [freshmen] took the same electives … except that some of us took Algebra I and others took Math A; some took ESL classes and some took regular or honors English.

Other than their encounters with unexpected class scheduling conflicts, none of the interviewees expressed any surprise about the classes in which they eventually enrolled during their freshmen year. Although informants were not asked about whether they felt they "belong" in a certain academic track, their general lack of surprise suggests that, by the time they began high school, some may have already formed expectations about the track into which they will be placed.

The interview data suggest that the type of English course into which students are placed when they entered ninth grade may determine their relative access to college-preparatory classes throughout high school. For example, Mandy, who is nineteen-years-old and currently attending a four-year public university, was placed in honors classes in ninth grade. During the next three years, Mandy continued on the honors track and took three Advanced Placement courses (calculus, English, chemistry) along with three years of German. Thao, who is nineteen-years old and currently a sophomore at a state university, took regular English in ninth grade and went on to take college-preparatory English, chemistry, algebra II, and advanced Spanish in his junior year. Meanwhile, twenty-year-old Shoua was placed in a ninth grade ESL class, along with five other classes where "there was a lot of Hmong and Mexican students in the class." She eventually took "regular" courses such as anatomy and algebra, but never had the opportunity to take any of the five honors or AP courses offered at her high school. Shoua, who lives with her parents, is currently taking coursework at a community college to become a medical assistant. It is important to note that Mandy, Thao and Shoua were all born in the United States.

The higher education trajectories of these three individual students correspond neatly with California's stratified public higher education hierarchy with its three tracks — differentiated by status, fiscal and curricular resources, selectivity, and numerous other characteristics — represented by the University of California (UC), California State University (CSU), and California Community College (CCC) systems. Moreover, the starting points for these distinct trajectories were already determined by the placement examinations that Mandy, Thao, and Shoua took several years earlier in eighth grade.

Selecting Courses and Access to College Preparatory Curricula

When informants were asked about the kinds of help they received from their parents and school guidance counselors in choosing classes, several of them stated that they received very little or no help at all from parents in choosing classes. Steven, 18 years-old and a senior, explains, "Once in a while, my parents ask me what classes I'm taking and how I'm doing in them, just to check up on me, you know? But I always chose my own classes and electives [from the list of offered classes]." Hlee, an eighteen-year-old senior at the same high school, explains, "My parents never asked about what classes I was taking [in high school] in the past few years. I had to pick my own classes, and when there's room, I would take them. I haven't gone to the counselor all that much [for help with choosing classes], but I'm in my senior year, and I've been there a couple of times to get copies of my transcript for colleges."

However, not all students could simply choose their own classes. The experience of Thai, a thirty-two-year-old college graduate who was classified as an ESL student when he first started school in ninth grade, is most revealing:

> I remember a time when I was at [High School]. I was placed in ESL during ninth and tenth grades, so in the beginning of tenth grade I wanted to change that; so I went to Mrs. [Name], the counselor, to ask if I could take a college-prep English instead. I tried to reason with her that I had already gotten good grades ["A" in the ESL class, math and four other classes], and that I wanted to take the college-prep English class that would count towards the A through F requirements (the minimum course requirements for admission to the University of California then). She wouldn't let me [enroll in college-prep English] even though I told her that my ELD [English Language Development] teacher also felt I was capable of doing the work. I felt that she looked only at my [spoken] English and didn't consider how well I have done in all my other classes. In the end, I had no option but to remain in ESL classes throughout high school.

Thai's experience shows that, even though counselors were not actively "choosing" classes for him, they did play an important role as gatekeepers to college-preparatory courses. In a follow-up interview, Thai explains that he thinks he could have been able to go to a UC, which is more selective than the CSU he attended, had

he been allowed to take more college-preparatory courses, especially college-preparatory English:

> Thai: When I received the letter from Chico State that I had been accepted, I was excited and pretty happy [that at least it's a CSU—implying that CSU is still better than a community college]. I also applied to UC Davis and [Sacramento] State, but I didn't get in to Davis.
>
> Interviewer: Looking back, do you think things could have been different? I mean, would you have taken different classes in high school?
>
> Thai: I wish I had taken college-prep English, because I earned good grades in all my other classes. I think that that would have made a difference. … I tell my younger brother, Terry, that he should take the hard classes (AP English, calculus, physics, etc.) and get good grades so that he has a chance to go to a UC school.

Thai believes that, had the counselor allowed him to take college-preparatory English, he could have earned a decent grade in the course and thereby increased his chances of being admitted to a UC.

Differential Experiences Between Tracks

Not surprisingly, Hmong American students tracked differently report having different academic experiences and exposure to mainstream class materials. As Mai Vang, who was seven when her family arrived in the U.S. and a high school graduate of the class of 1997, recalls:

> Yeah, we read a lot of plays and novels. I remember the anthologies of poems and plays especially. … My English teacher had us do a lot of reading and creative writing, but we also did a lot of acting [with Shakespearean plays].
>
> Interviewer: What were some memorable books you read during high school?
>
> Mai Vang: Two of my favorite novels are *The Great Gatsby* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.*

Mai Vang's courses and experiences stand in sharp contrast to those of Lue, who was sixteen years of age upon arrival to the U.S. and was an ELD student throughout all of high school. When asked to share about his experiences with English during high school, Lue

recaps being a student in the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program:

> When we [his parents, two younger sisters and him] came to the U.S. in 1992, and I started in ninth grade, I was about sixteen then. I remember being in Mrs. [teacher]'s AVID class; the thing I remember most is that we had to take a lot of notes in AVID. I guess it was helpful because it helped me pass my Senior Project. … No, we never read *Macbeth* or *The Crucible*—I've never heard of them until you asked.

Hmong American students in ELD tracks also seem to have less knowledge and lower aspirations about college than their non-ELD peers. While many factors could contribute to these differences, one cause could be differences in coursework and socialization that they experience in their respective tracks. Pao, who is currently a senior in high school, demonstrates how his experience exemplifies that of many other Hmong American students placed in ELD tracks.

> I never knew that places like Chico State and Sac State required students to take a foreign language, until last year, in my junior year. I found out that I already missed [an opportunity to take] Spanish I and II. And, I found out [from a classmate and friend] that the CSUs and UCs required all college-prep courses and a 3.0 GPA. At this point, I'm not sure if I can get into a CSU because I don't know if some of my classes will count [as college-prep credit].

Participants' responses suggest that ELD students tend to feel more ill-equipped for college than their non-ELD peers. Kong, an eighteen-year-old, U.S.-born citizen was placed in an ELD class during ninth grade [based on a placement test] but was reclassified and moved into a regular English class at the beginning of his sophomore year. To the question, "What are your plans after high school?" Kong replied,

> I'm not sure where I'm going to go [for college]. I feel like… school isn't really for me. But, you know, it's hard finding jobs in [city]. Some of my older friends who went to college are having a hard time finding work. I think I'm going to try to find a job and if that doesn't work out, I'll apply to college.

Kong's reply reveals that he (1) feels unmotivated to pursue college education, because he feels unprepared; (2) questions the value of

a college education because it cannot guarantee a person employment; and (3) keeps college as an option, just in case.

Interviews with Hmong American students with access to college-preparatory and honors courses indicate that students in these tracks not only seem to know more about college, but also generally hold more optimistic views about the possibilities that college have for their future. Hlee, for instance, has a clear idea about the college she wishes to attend and the kind of career she wants to pursue later on: "I definitely would choose Cal (UC Berkeley) if I get accepted.... I eventually want to go to law school and become a public defender." According to Hlee, "I would be the second in my family to go to college, and all of my teachers are pretty excited that I've applied to five different schools. I am too!" Hlee completed her college applications and is waiting to hear back from colleges on admission decisions.

Although qualitative data from these informants are not generalizable to all Hmong American students, their interview responses clearly raise questions about whether tracking might be associated with differential access to rigorous curricula and resources. Furthermore, based on informants' actual course enrollment by grade level and the courses opened to them, it appears that EL students who do not become reclassified as fluent English speakers by ninth grade usually get placed in ELD classrooms when they enter high school. The experiences of my informants corroborate previous findings that placement in ELD English corresponds to placement in other low-level courses, such as a remedial or regular math course rather than a college-preparatory, honors or AP math (Berman et al., 1992, cited in Heubert and Hauser, 1999). In contrast, students, including those formerly classified as EL, who are placed in college preparatory or AP tracks typically do enroll in college preparatory and AP English, math, science, foreign language and social science courses. To consider whether this phenomenon might be unique to the individual northern California school district where my informants attended, the next section provides descriptive information about another district in the state with a large Hmong American population.

Evidence from Fresno Unified School District

Evidence from one of California's largest school districts, Fresno Unified School District (FUSD), suggests that this phenomenon is not locally isolated.[13] Specifically, evidence from FUSD

shows that there are disparities in the enrollment of EL students in college preparatory curricula, gifted programs, and AP or honors courses.[14] Fresno Unified's Office of Research reports that EL students have significantly lower enrollment in college preparatory courses that meet the minimum course requirements for enrollment in the UC and CSU campuses.[15] For instance, in 2003, ELs, English-only, and redesignated FEP students comprised 28 percent, 61 percent, and 11 percent of the Fresno Unified's total enrollment, respectively. However, the percentage of ELs meeting UC minimum course requirements was only about 10 percent during 2002 and 14 percent in 2003. In comparison, 23 percent of English-only students met UC minimum course requirements during 2002 and 32 percent of them did so during 2003 (Garcia, 2003, 16-17).

Furthermore, during 2003, only 11 percent of ELs were enrolled in Advanced Placement and honors courses, compared to 67 percent of English-only students who were enrolled in AP or honors courses. This disparity was even sharper during the previous five years. In 1998, for instance, the percentage of ELs in AP or honors courses was 6 percent, compared to 75 percent among English-only students. Although the percentage of Redesignated-FEP[16] students enrolled in AP or honors courses was higher than that of EL students, it was still much lower than that of English-only students. In 1998, 19 percent of R-FEP students were enrolled in AP or honors courses. That same year, only 15 percent of R-FEP students were enrolled in GATE. Five years later, in 2003, the percentage of R-FEP students enrolled in GATE and AP or honors courses increased only slightly to 22 percent and 22 percent respectively (Garcia, 2003, 16). This was still far behind English-only students' 67 percent enrollment in AP/honors courses.

Discussion

Although a number of studies have begun to examine various experiences and perspectives of Hmong American high school and college students, few have actually addressed the intersectional question of how and to what extent Hmong American students move *from* high schools *to* colleges. As Ngo and Lee (2007) point out, much of the recent literature on Hmong American students has tended to focus on cultural barriers to academic achievement. While individual, family, and cultural factors might have varying influences on Hmong American students' opportunities to learn,

it is also possible that current education policies and institutionalized practices are critical in directly facilitating or constraining students' opportunities. To determine more comprehensively and empirically whether this is the case, it is of utmost importance to examine Hmong American students' disaggregated experiences with tracking in the lower grades (K-8) and their access or lack of access to college preparatory and Advanced Placement curricula in high school. It is possible that the current educational system of classification, testing, and tracking of language minority students might unintentionally produce and maintain educational inequities. Specifically, they might deny many language minority students access to learning, materials, and teachers in college-preparatory curriculum in high schools. If so, this reality could seriously limit these students' chances of being accepted to four-year universities, such as the UC and CSU campuses.

Given that the UC and CSU campuses, as well as other private four-year universities have stringent minimum requirements and given that meeting minimum requirements alone rarely results in acceptance, Hmong American students' lack of opportunity to take the required college preparatory courses places them at a great disadvantage, as illustrated in this study. Since college preparatory courses are designed to provide academic knowledge and skills, as well as to produce attitudes and habits expected in the college environment, EL students who do not have these opportunities may be at a greater risk of not graduating, even if they are admitted into college.

The evidence presented here suggests that tracking of students based on language minority status might constitute a form of unfair segregation because it can function to deny language minority students equal access to resources and curricula that English-only students normally get by virtue of being native speakers. In saying this, I am not arguing that integrating language minority students in mainstream curricula by itself will ensure equitable access to a quality education; nor am I arguing for a one-size-fits-all curriculum. It is, in part, the tangible resources, healthy family and peer networks, faculty support, and high quality academic training available in and cultivated through rigorous curricula that make access to college viable for ethnic and language minority students. Conversely, tracking systems could have negative impact on students' access to these important resources and, consequently, a college education. In an

earlier work (Xiong and Zhou, 2006), my collaborator and I urge the state and school districts to make appropriate and significant changes to: (1) the existing method of classifying language minority students; (2) the use of a single test to place students in ELD curricula; (3) the illogical English Learner reclassification criteria; and (4) the tracking of students into remedial, non-college preparatory curricula.

Needs for Further Research

This study raises many further questions, such as under what conditions and to what extent are students in non-mainstream curricula able to access a college education; and to what extent do students in mainstream curricula confront the same obstacles to college? Researchers should seek disaggregated data on ELs and their academic outcomes, in order to examine more rigorously the causal relationships among these factors.

Further longitudinal research on Hmong and other ELs' academic experiences is needed, beginning with younger grade levels and moving across their academic trajectories and including their intersections with (or marginalization from) higher education access, opportunity, and achievement. Moreover, because the category of ELs is made up of ethnically and linguistically diverse groups of students, researchers and policymakers should more carefully analyze similarities and differences across groups with respect to the ways in which tracking may contribute to disparate academic outcomes in K-12 and college access. The obstacles of EL groups, including Hmong and Spanish speakers, for example, may be significantly different due to differences in their economic location, political influence, social status, immigration status, and residential characteristics.

Notes

1. California Education Code defines "English learner" as "a child who does not speak English or whose native language is not English and who is not currently able to perform ordinary classroom work in English, also known as a Limited English Proficiency or LEP child" (Education Code §305-306). CA Education Code §300-340 resulted from Proposition 227 (1999). For research on the implementation and initial impacts of Prop. 227, see García and Curry-Rodriguez (2000) and Gándara (2000).
2. California Education Code 305, Code of Regulations Title 5, sections 11301 and 11302.

3. Lau *v*. Nichols, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).
4. Under federal and state law, a student whose first language is not English is considered a language minority. These laws recognize only one "primary" language and do not consider the real possibility that many school children learn and speak more than one language from a very young age.
5. The state Department of Education states further that "all students, whose home language is not English, must take the CELDT within 30 calendar days after they are enrolled in a California public school for the first time to determine if they are an English learner."
6. CA Education Code §305 does not define what "good working knowledge of English" means. Ed. Code §306c refers to a "reasonable fluency in English." The Code of Regulations states only that these levels of English proficiency are to be measured by "any of the state-designated assessments approved by the California Department of Education, or any locally developed assessments" (CA Code of Regulations, Title 5, §11301).
7. On the surface, this seems to suggest that in 10 years time, nearly 100 percent of EL students would be reclassified. On closer examination, however, this is not the case. Many schools have new students entering and old students exiting at each grade level on a regular basis. This means (1) that the total number of EL students fluctuates and (2) the make-up of EL students at each grade level does not remain constant from year to year.
8. It is important to note that redesignation rates are not entirely comparable across years, because reclassification criteria have not been completely consistent. Variations may be also due to differences in school districts' reclassification criteria. Linquanti (2001) cautions that methods used to calculate reclassification rates from English Learners to FEP, which are often used as a measure of how quickly students are becoming proficient in English, vary according to a number of factors such as administrative processes and timing of test assessments, and therefore such rate can "greatly distort the reality of student progress and program effectiveness."
9. Although the media, including some CA Dept. of Education public relations personnel, frequently use increases in the state's overall CELDT scores to suggest that the current education programs designed for language minority students is working, caution is needed when interpreting these increases. It is not known what factors actually caused the increase in CELDT scores.
10. California Code of Regs., Title 5, §11301.
11. The source of this data can be known by contacting the author. It is intentionally left without citation here to protect the identity of the school district and informants.

12. The placement exam scores did not determine students' other elective courses. Some courses, such as P.E. were required for all ninth graders. Students could choose which language course to enroll in, whether to take biology or anatomy, etc.
13. Within FUSD, Spanish speakers make up 65 percent of all EL students, while Hmong speakers make up 25 percent, followed by Khmer, 4 percent, and Lao, 3 percent. More than three-quarters (79 %) of FUSD students received free or reduced lunch. Source: Figures obtained from the Education Data Partnership website, under Fresno Unified School District. Online access: http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us/welcome.asp, viewed September 5, 2005.
14. During 2004-05, EL student enrollment (23,597) comprised 29 percent of the school district's total enrollment Source: California Department of Education. 2005. Data retrieved from DataQuest. Online access: http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/, viewed September 5, 2005.
15. "Minimum course requirement" refers to the courses required for University of California (UC) and/or California State University (CSU) entrance with a grade of "C" or better. This represents only a portion of the entrance requirements for UC or CSU. In general, students who meet UC's minimum course requirements also fulfill CSU's minimum course requirements. To entirely meet UC minimum entrance requirements, a student must meet UC's A-G subject course requirements (i.e., complete a set of college preparatory courses in math, science, English, foreign language, etc.), have at least a 2.8 GPA, take the SAT I or ACT, and take the SAT II (Writing, Math, and one other area). UC also has an "eligibility by examination alone" criterion and a separate set of criteria for "eligibility in the local context" (being at the top 4 percent of one's high school class is one of the requirements).
16. Redesignated means the same thing as reclassified in this paper.

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