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Study Finds Social Barriers To Advanced Classes

By **Debra Viadero**

Simply opening up access to honors and advanced courses is not enough to encourage substantial numbers of poor or minority students to take them, a study suggests.

Published last month in *American Educational Research Journal*, the study is considered the first of its kind to look critically at what happens when high schools and middle schools open classes traditionally reserved for their most successful students to anyone wishing to enroll.

It is based on three- year-long case studies of 10 racially mixed secondary schools around the country that adopted the open-door policies in an effort to "detrack" their instructional programs and create new academic opportunities for underachieving students.

The study is timely because it comes as opinionmakers and experts contend that boosting minority enrollments in tough academic classes could help close the achievement gap that separates most African-American and Hispanic students from their higher-achieving white counterparts.

"It seems like virtually every secondary school you go to has some degree of this kind of choice-based enrollment policy now," said Amy Stuart Wells, a co-author of the study and a professor of sociology in education at Teachers College, Columbia University. "The popular phrase is 'We don't have tracking here.' What our study shows is that there all kinds of ways that students still feel tracked."

In interviews with students, parents, teachers, and school administrators conducted from 1992 to 1995, Ms. Wells and co-authors Susan Yonezawa and Irene Serna identified a host of hidden social and institutional barriers that keep poor or minority students out of higher-level classes.

For instance, some schools advertised their open-access policies only by word of mouth, a system that tended to work better for white students than for minorities.

Black and Hispanic students also complained that teachers and guidance counselors discouraged

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them from taking advanced classes and, in some cases, refused to allow them to enroll. One counselor, for example, told researchers that she screened out students that she considered unfit by giving them a quick, on-the-spot reading-comprehension test.

Critical Relationships

Often, however, minority students themselves made the decision to avoid advanced classes. Told for most of their lives that they were low or average achievers, many students concluded they didn't "have what it takes" to make it in the honors classes, the study found.

Others balked at the prospect of abandoning lifelong friends for classes in which they might be the only minority student in the room.

"I felt like I had to prove myself and prove that blacks weren't stupid," said one student who took an honors math class.

Students feared, too, that old friends would accuse them of "acting white."

Other minority students shunned advanced classes in favor of courses such as African-American journalism or African-American history because they felt the higher-level curriculum did not reflect their cultural heritage.

"One of the things we came to realize was that it wasn't simply a matter of the academic prowess that students needed to develop—but that there was a social aspect students needed to develop as well," said Ms. Yonezawa, a partnership coordinator at the Center for Educational Equity and Testing Excellence at the University of California, San Diego. "Students can't leave their identities at the door."

Where minority students were succeeding in advanced courses, researchers found, schools or individual teachers had created "safe spaces or homeplaces" where students felt comfortable and believed their thoughts and opinions were valued.

"Kids have a very keen sense of who believes in them and who doesn't," Ms. Wells said. "In all the talk about tracking and detracking, we forget the whole human side of schools and how those relationships are critical."