Tracking the Basic Writer

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TRACKING THE BASIC WRITER

by

Timothy Donohue

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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Abstract

Since the 1970s, composition teachers and theorists have been advocating the term "basic writer" to give a space and voice to underprepared students entering college by providing them with basic skills remediation. Despite the various pedagogical approaches to these classes that have been established and put into practice over the years, there is still large disagreement among educators on how to best prepare these students for entrance into the mainstream college environment.

This study begins by examining the history of the basic writing movement, acknowledging key figures and the salient ideas of their works. A broad overview is given to establish a foundation for the reader, and additional reading on the subject is suggested. Though much of the existing research in the field of basic writing focuses on the collegiate level, this study examines high school students—at a suburban school—who were tracked in basic classes until they were mainstreamed during their senior year. Using anonymous participants, the overarching objective is to examine the basic writers of the school to determine any connections between class level and the students' self-perception, motivation, and achievement. Through the use of questionnaires and interviews with students, teachers, and administrators, both qualitative and quantitative data is analyzed, and the experiences of the students and teachers are examined in connection with basic writing research.

The findings reveal why this transition from a basic track to an inclusionary model took place, and who, specifically, is benefiting from this philosophical transformation. Additionally, suggestions are made to improve the existing limitations. Though there are no hard and fast solutions presented, this study nevertheless sheds light
on the struggles of high school basic writers and how, moving forward, they can escape the basic track before entering college.
TRACKING THE BASIC WRITER

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

by

Timothy Donohue
Montclair State University
Montclair, NJ
2012
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Introduction

Over the past three years at Birnam High School—a suburban school of approximately 1,400 students, grades 9-12—there has been a systematic and on-going revision process with the English curriculum. Of the many changes made, one of the most significant has been the removal of the basic level track. Prior to the 2011-2012 school year when the basic level was officially phased out in Paramus, the term “basic” referred to the lowest level, mainstream class that an English student could take. Moreover, once a student was set on this track, he or she was more or less relegated to this environment for all of high school; there was no usual means for moving out of the track, even if a student was failing in that particular environment. Thus, the administration’s decision to remove the basic track is one that will have long reaching implications on the academic community as a whole, and, most significantly, it is a decision that some administrators have already begun to second guess.

While extensive research has been done in the field of basic writing, there is a continued sense of disagreement among educators about how remediation should be approached. The movement was established in the 1970s as an attempt to better assist underprepared students (usually college freshman) who were in need of writing remediation before they were able to enter mainstream classes. This educational shift was pioneered by Mina Shaughnessy—and later by Mike Rose—as the newly established open-access program\(^1\) at the City University of New York gave rise to an increasing number of underprepared students. Prior to the various publications of the *Journal of Basic Writing* beginning in 1974, which established the name “basic writer,” these

\(^1\) This program “guaranteed to every city resident with a high school diploma a place in one its eighteen tuition free colleges” (Shaughnessy 1).
students were identified as "remedial" writers—a term with explicitly negative connotations. This new terminology, in large part, was meant to soften the stigma associated with the remedial track and shift the perception from these students as "eleventh hour learners with dim prospects for improvement in writing" to students capable of growth if given the necessary attention and instruction (Shaughnessy 298).

Indeed, some students did experience success in smaller, homogenously grouped classes that were able to better individualize instruction. However, what was lacking at the time was an appropriate pedagogical approach to instruction that could help these students who, for the most part, "had grown up in ethnic or racial enclaves" and "had spoken other languages or dialects" (Shaughnessy 3). For these students, issues of class and race limited their knowledge of Standard Written English, yet, upon entering college, they were immediately punished for their grammatical inadequacies by teachers who placed too much emphasis on the errors that students were making rather than on the underlying causes of those errors. To address these issues, Mina Shaughnessy, in her book *Errors and Expectations*, established a framework for basic writing instruction, which sought to demystify the various difficulties that basic writers experienced. Though the book was groundbreaking and became a touchstone text for basic writing teachers, it nevertheless left many issues unresolved. Since then, there have been ongoing debates about the practicality of a basic writing track.

On one hand, advocates see the value in establishing a safe learning environment for a very diverse population of struggling writers who, with the right type of instruction, are allowed to embrace their differences and connect cultural discourse to their writing. Yet, so much depends upon a pedagogue who can "search in what students write and say
for clues to their reasoning and their purposes, and in what he does for gaps and misjudgments" (Shaughnessy 292). Thus an issue still looming today is whether or not teachers are ever prepared enough to effectively facilitate a basic writing course. On the other hand, if basic writing, as it often does, becomes, according to David Bartholomae, "a course designed to make those cultural differences disappear or to hide contestation or to enforce divisions between high and low," then the marginalizing effects of tracking become clear (183). Likewise, Joseph Harris, in A Teaching Subject, argues against "Shaughnessy’s relentless focus on the teaching of grammar,” which he believes “might in many cases actually hinder the attempts of anxious and inexperienced students to elaborate their thoughts effectively in writing” (77). For Harris, “matters of stance and argument” (84) are essential to student learning, and he imagines an educational space where “correctness thus becomes not the single and defining issue in learning how to write but simply one aspect of developing a more general communicative competence” (83). Without this compromise, students in a strictly error-based environment often focus on their deficiencies in writing as though they were “suffering from specifiable, locatable defects, deficits, and handicaps that can be localized, circumscribed, and remedied,” which only, then, “serves to exclude, from the academic community those who are so labeled” (Rose 210). Ultimately, the question remains—that if students are marginalized and stigmatized by the label basic writer, yet are equally unprepared for a mainstream class—what is the most beneficial environment for them?

This very broad overview of the history of basic writing and tracking establishes the controversial nature of the topic as well as the various difficulties facing educational
institutions. Today, the conversation continues and various new models have been established in the wake of Shaughnessy and Rose’s work. Specifically, the development of “The Studio Model” and “The Intensive Model” has begun to bridge the gap between an isolated basic track and a completely mainstreamed track. The “studio” approach allows basic writers to participate in a mainstream composition course while providing an additional, supplementary class in which students “discuss grammatical and rhetorical issues from the composition course and do writing workshops to improve the essay drafts assigned in the standard course” (Lalicker). Through this approach, “basic and standard composition students are all working equally and collaboratively toward fluency in academic discourse and critical discourse consciousness” (Lalicker). Similarly, in “The Intensive Model,” a prerequisite basic writing class is eliminated and students instead meet in a five credit standard composition class, accompanied by “intensive sections that include additional instruction time or writing activities tailored for basic writers” (Lalicker). At the beginning of the semester, students are placed in their sections based on a specific set of placement criteria and meet continuously with that group, “while in the studio model, students from several different sections of standard composition come together at random in the studio lab sections” (Lalicker). Though slightly different, both approaches attempt to mainstream basic writing students while at the same time providing the necessary framework of developmental support.

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2 For additional reading, see: Lu and Horner, *Representing the Other: Basic Writers and the Teaching of Basic Writing*; Gray-Rosendale, *Rethinking Basic Writing*; Wiley, "Mainstreaming and Other Experiments in a Learning Community."

3 See also Grego and Thompson: *Teaching/Writing in Third Spaces: The Studio Model (Studies in Writing & Rhetoric)*

4 See also Segal: "Embracing a Porcupine: Redesigning a Writing Program."
Though Shaughnessy, Rose, Bartholomae, and others in the field all focused their studies on collegiate basic writers, many of their core concerns are prevalent today in my high school. In fact, the social implications of a basic track in high school are perhaps more profound than they are in college. Within a small high school community, there is no hiding from the basic label, and socially, those in the basic track are the minority. In college, in a much larger environment, students are not as easily defined by their classes or judged by their peers. Additionally, whereas high school students are forced into the basic track and are thus marginalized at a school they must attend, college students are able to use the basic track as a springboard toward higher education—an endeavor that they have willingly undertaken. At Birnam High School, the social dynamic—for English students at least—is in a state of flux as the school transitions from a basic track model to an inclusionary model where the basic students are folded into the college preparation classes. This year, for the first time, the seniors who had been previously tracked in basic classes, are now part of college preparation classes, and none of the current freshman, sophomores, or juniors has experienced a basic level English class; thus, this year’s seniors are in a unique position since some are experiencing the college preparation level for the first time while many others are experiencing this level for the first time with the “basic” students included. Naturally, a shift in dynamic such as this one has impacted both groups of learners and their teachers as well.

With these changes in mind, I’m curious as to who is benefiting and why, specifically, this shift in philosophy occurred. While so much of the basic writing research deals with the collegiate level, a thorough analysis of the situation at my school would yield relevant data for basic writers at the high school level, teachers who instruct
them, and administrators who make decisions about their future. My goal for this study is to examine the basic writers of my school and the connection between class level and students’ self-perception, motivation, and achievement. Additionally, this research could also help to illustrate what happens to struggling writers before they arrive at the college level and find themselves placed in a remedial writing class. As a past teacher of basic classes, I’ve always had a soft spot for these students, but I was never certain if tracking was the answer. Now, with their inclusion in mainstream English classes, they have escaped the basic track, but have they acclimated to these new expectations, this new environment, or have they already gotten lost in the crowd?

Research Methods

To facilitate this research, I decided to work closely with the students, teachers, and administrators who are directly connected to these tracking changes. The most valuable data I received was from the students themselves, particularly those who have experienced both the basic and college preparation level. While an examination of student grades and writing could suffice as markers of student achievement, I nevertheless tried to determine the possible implications of student attitude in connection with overall achievement. Since the work that students produce does not necessarily reflect their abilities, it was necessary to consider the process portion of each student’s learning, and likewise, his or attitude throughout that process. Ultimately, negative attitudes or a lack of motivation can mar even the best basic writing program if students don’t buy into it or don’t feel comfortable within it, which makes analyzing the overall effectiveness of tracking that much more problematic. Therefore, at the heart of this
study is a metacognitive approach in which I asked the students to think about their place in the school environment and how it impacts their motivation and achievement.

**Student Questionnaires**

As a first step, all 74 of the students who are currently in a college preparation senior English class were given a questionnaire to complete. The goal of the questionnaire was to provide anonymous data about current and prior experiences of these students in their English classes. I wanted the students to consider the differences among their classes and their teachers' expectations of them, and if applicable, between the different levels (basic or college preparation) that they have experienced. To maximize student engagement and honesty, I kept the questionnaires completely anonymous so that the students felt comfortable answering the questions without any fear of recourse. In addition, because the students had time to reflect on each question before answering it, they were given the opportunity to formulate thoughtful responses. The questionnaire was a logical and helpful first step as each provided a fairly thorough overview of that student's experience in high school English.

**Student Interviews**

As a second form of data, I conducted a more thorough study, focusing on six students who were previously in basic classes. Within my interviews, I asked the students to reflect on both learning environments—again, with a specific emphasis on self-perception, motivation, and achievement, specifically with writing. My overarching rationale for conducting interviews was that they could reveal more than the questionnaires. While many students did answer the questionnaires to the best of their abilities, some clearly struggled to develop their thoughts in writing and could have
benefited from an additional push; also, others had very little to say about some questions, while others, still, left answers completely blank. The interviews, then, provided a forum where I could engage with the students, provoke their thinking, ask them follow-up questions, and ultimately gain a thorough understanding of any possible connections between tracking and the students’ attitudes and emotions.

These interviews provided an opportunity for the students to discuss their personal experiences in a safe environment, which, according to Weiss, “can be valuable because one’s experience, through the process of being voiced and shared, is validated” (122). Though there is always the possibility that interviews may make students anxious or emotional since they are articulating highly personal details of their educational experiences, they were nevertheless a necessary part of my research since the potential benefits outweigh the potential risks. Therefore, during and after all interviews, I remained open to debriefing with students who felt the need to discuss any issues that these questions elicited.5

**Student Participants**

After much consideration, I decided to limit my interviews to three students so that I could thoroughly explore each student’s situation. To ensure a well-rounded study, I selected high school seniors with different backgrounds and different experiences within the English classroom. While I began each interview with a carefully constructed set of questions, I found that with each student, the interview took on a life of its own and led me in directions that I could not have anticipated. Thus, the data I received from these students was both eye-opening and invaluable. After each interview, I asked the students

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5 All research procedures are approved by the Montclair State I.R.B.
for a description of themselves and for any information that they would like me to include in this study. Each student selected a pseudonym and agreed on what information could and could not be included. What follows is a brief description of the participants to help contextualize their experiences both inside and outside of the classroom.

**Michelle**

Hispanic-American and born and raised in the Bronx, New York, Michelle moved to Birnam the summer before her freshman year of high school. Michelle spent her first two years in basic English classes—earning a B in grade 9 and an A- in grade 10—before moving to the college preparation level for grades 11 and 12 where she has earned a B- both years. Interestingly enough, no data could be found concerning why she was initially placed in the basic level when she entered the school. In fact, at the end of eighth grade, she was offered a position in an honors school in the Bronx. Yet, when she arrived at Birnam High School, she was placed in the basic track. According to Michelle, "I did really well in my school in the Bronx, especially in English. I think my test scores were all very good, so I don't know why I was put in basic. Those two years really frustrated me because I knew I didn't belong there." Michelle admitted that she had never talked about her frustrations with the school, and she asked me to investigate her placement further at my discretion.

**Eric**

Raised in Korea for the first 10 years of his life, Eric moved to Birnam at the beginning of sixth grade and entered the E.S.L. program at his elementary school. Eric struggled mightily to learn English and ultimately failed the class for the year. Because his parents
spoke only Korean at home, Eric admitted, "It was difficult for me to practice what I was learning in school. My parents helped me, but they spoke to me in Korean so it was tough. I really didn't learn much that year. The next year, they didn't offer E.S.L. in middle school, so I kept struggling with English." Eric's problems continued throughout middle school, and he entered Birnam High School in the basic track since all of his English proficiency scores were so low; however, for some reason, he was not entered into the E.S.L. class at the high school. In his first two years in basic English classes, Eric earned a B- and a B+ respectively before moving up to the college preparation level for grades 11 and 12 where he earned a C and a C- respectively. From his grades alone, it is clear that Eric excelled much more in the basic environment, yet he made the choice to move to the college prep classroom. He and I explored this decision and its impact on his learning in depth throughout the interview.

Gerald

Caucasian and born and raised in Birnam, Gerald, unlike the previous two participants, spent his first three years in the basic level and only moved up to college preparation when he was forced to by the school his senior year. After earning a B, B+, and C in his first three years in basic, respectively, he has maintained a B in college preparation. A very shy and quiet young man, Gerald resented the move to the larger class environment and admitted, "I felt really uncomfortable in such a large class. I enjoyed the small basic classes that I had in the past, and I was much more nervous going to class this year." In the interview, Gerald was very deliberate with his answers and often took a significant amount of time to think about each response before he spoke. He struggled, at times, to articulate what he was thinking, and I could see him becoming frustrated by his inability
to formulate exactly what he wanted to say. In the end, however, his methodical approach to the interview delivered some extremely illuminating and insightful ideas concerning the tension between the basic and college preparation learning environments.

Teacher Participants

To develop triangulation within my research, I interviewed teachers who have taught both the basic and the college preparation level. When focusing on their basic classes, I wanted to know what the experience was like for them and for their students. Specifically, I tried to determine if and how teacher expectations vary depending on the level that they are teaching and how differentiated instruction played a role—if any—at either level. In terms of their college preparation classes, my focus was on the overall preparedness of these teachers in terms of having the basic level students included as part of their college preparation classes. Much of the interviews focused heavily on professional development in two ways: Did the teachers receive any sort of professional development before being assigned this type of class? And, moving forward, what specific type of professional development would they envision as helpful to their experiences with this type of class? Overall, my main goal in conducting teacher interviews was to track how the removal of the basic level has impacted the teachers’ perceived ability to perform their pedagogical duties successfully. What follows is a brief description of each teacher and his or her experience as an educator.

Nancy

An English teacher at Birnam High School teacher for the past 26 years, Nancy offered a wealth of information concerning the history of the school’s basic track and how it has evolved over the years since the early 90s. Within the English Department, Nancy is
undoubtedly the most experienced basic teacher, and for years, she has been mentoring newer teachers in regard to the basic curriculum and environment. Over the years, she has consistently taught college prep and honors English classes as well, so her analysis of tracking and the subtleties of the different levels was very insightful. Based on my interview with her, it is clear that Nancy is an advocate of a more inclusive model, given the limitations and frustrations that she experienced as a teacher of basic, for over 20 years, at Birnam High School.

**Christopher**

Since graduating from a local university six years ago, Christopher has been teaching basic, college prep, and honors English classes at Birnam High School. Christopher’s range of experience became very apparent in our interview, and he was very adept at articulating what it takes for him to negotiate the differences between teaching basic and college preparation. Currently, he is completing his final course for a Master’s in Educational Leadership at a local university. Christopher and I teach many of the same classes, so we often discuss the curriculum and the students’ motivation and achievement. Early this year, Christopher became noticeably frustrated with his college prep classes, particularly because of the impact that the students who were previously in basic classes were having on the environment. We’ve continued to discuss these issues throughout the year, and some of our early conversations helped this study to take shape. Though Christopher acknowledges certain benefits of a basic writing class, he too believes in a more inclusionary approach, yet he admits that what exists currently at Birnam High School is by no means the solution.
Administrator Participant

To complete the triangulation of my research, I interviewed the Supervisor of Secondary Education who has had a hand in all of the district's curricular changes since he assumed the position two years ago. During my interview with Cliff, I focused on what exactly precipitated the change in school philosophy—the removal of the basic track. I discovered when the shift in thinking began, if the shift was rooted in current research, and what the results of the shift have been so far. Though he was not in this position when the changes began, he is well aware of why it happened, and he clearly sees the effects of it today. What makes him an even more credible source on the subject is that he was previously an English teacher at Birnam High School. The following is a brief description of his history as an educator, which aims to establish the unique position that he currently maintains.

Cliff

After graduating from a local university, Cliff taught basic, college prep, and honors classes at Birnam High School for nine years. Cliff was known for his innovative teaching strategies and was a very influential basic teacher. In my interview with him, he explained many of the reasons why he believed that basic writing can be an effective model for struggling students. With aspirations to effect pedagogical change in the school, Cliff became the English Department Supervisor after completing a Master's in Educational Leadership, and a year later, he was awarded the Supervisor of Secondary Education position. Within his first two years, Cliff has worked to vertically articulate the English and Science curriculums, K-12—an experience that he cited frequently in the interview to explore the intricacies of tracking. Overall, his background makes him a
fairly unique authority on the subject—particularly as it pertains to students and teachers and Birnam High School—in determining the inherent benefits and drawbacks of tracking the basic writer.

**Theory vs. Practice: The Glaring Disconnect**

"You’re defined by your school as ‘slow’; you’re placed in a curriculum that isn’t designed to liberate you but to occupy you" (28).

-- Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary*

Rose’s words establish a clear image of what the basic track at Birnam High School became over the years. While in theory the course was designed to assist students with basic skills and to prepare them for the next level, in practice, it was something more limiting. With his experience as a basic teacher and now as an administrator at Birnam, Cliff was able to articulate this discrepancy:

You have the baseline that most people look at as the standard, which is the college preparation class; however, if the baseline is considered meeting of the proficiency for the standards, then one of the challenging aspects is trying to ensure that the basic doesn't fall below the standards, as understanding that students should exit the basic class with the same skill set or exposure and opportunity to the skill set as the college preparation class.

In practice, though, many of these students were not exposed to the same skills and opportunities. They were working below grade-level standards and were therefore struggling to catch up each year. What Birnam lost sight of is that the basic course is what the reading, writing, and speaking skills at each level should be based on, but the curriculum was not structured this way. To further clarify, Cliff states, “The basic course is where the kids should be able to meet the standards and meet proficiency. We need all kids to graduate high school with at least these expectations. In a college preparation
course, it asks them to take it beyond into a higher academic world—into college. And the honors class even augments that further.” In hindsight, this model would theoretically help all students reach a common goal of shared expectations. However, “what ended up happening is that the college preparation course became the norm, and it took away from the expectations of the basic kids, so they weren’t able to catch up with their peers and were not able to successfully move through the tracks as they should have been able to.”

In addition to the lack of appropriate curriculum articulation, there was also no clear rationale from the school administration to justify a basic track. At its inception in the early 90s, the basic track, according to Nancy, was for “kids who definitely were not going to college. You read, you wrote, but you did business letters and resumes—things like that. You didn’t have kids write a 4-6 page MLA paper because they were never going to need to do that type of paper.” Interestingly, these students were clearly set apart from the college preparation students because they were on track for a vocational trade of some kind. In terms of the school’s philosophy back then, Nancy says, “It was ok that we moved kids along on a continuum that would result in them definitely not going to college.” Over time that mindset changed and the goal was then to prepare all students for college, but as Cliff clearly illustrates, that never happened in practice as the basic students were working below the college preparation level. Using his experiences as a basic teacher, Christopher further substantiates this issue with his perspective on the basic environment as it existed just prior to its removal: “The basic level track, in my experience, was generally geared towards helping the students but not helping them to a point where they could move out of basic. It was helping them move along a basic track
that would continue into eternity.”

To illustrate the negative effects of a track that exists at a below-norm level and to clarify the administration’s rationale for removing the track, Cliff used the ongoing revisions to the science curriculum as a comparative model. By the 2012-2013 school year, all basic level science courses will be phased out and all ninth grade students, for the first time, will be taking algebra-based physics. Cliff offers this as a concrete example to remove the basic track because, as he says, “When we looked carefully at whether to keep a basic level and then a CP and an Honors level in ninth grade, the only distinction that would occur is the level of mathematics.” In this scenario, honors level students going into ninth grade physics will have demonstrated mastery and proficiency in Algebra I and will then be introduced to geometry. Aside from them, it is the rest of the students who have not demonstrated proficiency in algebra one. In this scaffolded approach, a basic level class would become purely conceptual and would be non-algebra based. When students move to 10th grade and enter a chemistry class, which requires the foundation of algebra-based physics, they will not be able to catch up with the skills of the class. Thus, the example of a purely conceptual science class versus as a mathematically skill-based class serves as a very concrete example of where the basic level wouldn’t work.

Cliff’s rationale for eliminating the basic level in science based on the mathematical requirements is similar to the basic skills requirements needed in the English classroom. While it is more abstract in the English environment because of the absence of something more easily quantifiable like mathematics, it is nevertheless very similar in terms of the specific reading, writing, and speaking skills that the students need
to demonstrate proficiency in at each level before moving up to a new set of requirements. The major flaw, then, in the English basic track as it existed, was the gap between the college preparation students who were working toward grade level standards and the basic students who were essentially working at the more "conceptual," below-level standard. This ever-widening gap, coupled with the inability of the teachers and students to narrow it over time, ultimately forced the hand of the administration.

However, in terms of the counterargument, by removing the basic track, the students are forced to work at the grade level standards, but at the expense of much less attention given to their skill-based needs, which could clearly cause them to struggle. Therefore, by considering both sides, it is evident that each has merit while at the same time the potential to fail the "basic" students.

**Basic Placement: The "Sorting" Process**

Cliff's observations concerning the disconnect between theory and practice clearly lay the foundation for why the basic track ultimately crumbled away. Yet to fully understand why this track was failing students, it is necessary to first examine how students were initially placed in the basic environment. From my interviews with the administrator, teachers, and students, it became quite clear that the tracking, to a degree, was somewhat arbitrary in nature. In "The Tidy House," David Bartholomae addresses this issue of placement when he says, "I cannot get over, however, my sense of the arbitrariness, the surrealism, of the choices represented by the sorting of students in actual basic and mainstream classes" (182). While he takes issue with the actual "sorting" of students into

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6 Beginning with the 2012-2013 school year, these requirements will be dictated by the New Jersey Common Core Standards, which I will address further in a later section.
two groups, my concern here is the factors that underlie this sorting process and the implications of what happens to a student once he or she is placed in the basic track.

Though the school had no actual literature on the placement process, I did discover a few common threads among the students in the basic classroom. From an administrative perspective, Cliff revealed that “a student can be in a basic class because of language difficulties, because of a specific learning disability, or because of emotional or behavioral issues that affect his academic performance.” Because of this wide range of extreme learning situations all bundled into one room, Cliff noted that “trying to cope with emotional issues, learning disabilities, and English-language proficiency struggles makes it very difficult to effectively teach to all groups of learners.” Pulling back from the placement of students in the basic environment, Cliff reflected on the sorting process as a whole:

I understand the concept of tracking is to at least group the students in three similar levels, but it’s not an exact science. You’re never going to get an exact group in the basic class who should all be in basic level. You can develop all the rubrics that you want, you can use proficiency on the NJ-ASK, scores on cognitive ability test, and scores in previous English classes, but it’s still not going to give you an exact indicator—it’s a best guess. Ultimately, there’s a point when it becomes an arbitrary tracking system. Technically, if you want the kids to succeed, if you have 340 kids in a grade, you should have 340 levels.

This best guess approach that Cliff identifies was clearly at work at Birnam High School. Many of the students were in need of basic skills remediation and were correctly placed based on test scores and grades while others, it seems, were not.

Taking Cliff’s ideas further, Christopher, who has been teaching basic English classes at Birnam for the past three years, notes a subtle problem with the placement

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7 The test scores here refer to standardized tests that students take in eighth grade.
process: “In the district, behavioral problem students traditionally were tracked into basic after freshman year. If they demonstrated that they were distracting the class or were not applying themselves academically, they were put in basic. It had nothing to do for those students with their ability level, and in many cases those students were very capable students.” The other dominant group that Christopher identified were classified students “who had an IEP and were struggling academically even though they were applying themselves.” For Christopher, this set up a tenuous dynamic in the basic classroom because there was a group of struggling students who were looking for assistance with basic skills and a group of apathetic students who often, as he says, “tried to band together to definitely destroy any chance of learning in the class.” To substantiate this further, Eric, who was placed in basic because he moved here from Korea, explained to me that “some kids are in basic because they moved to this country, or their schedule got screwed up, or they are just behavior issues.” Though Eric was new to the school community, he clearly recognizes the other reasons that students are placed into basic classes. Moreover, Eric echoes Christopher’s ideas about erroneous placement when he says, “I know kids who are those behavior problems who are really smart in basic, but they don’t take it seriously because it is easier than a college preparation class.” Once again, the placement of intelligent, underachieving students into the basic track because of behavioral issues further muddies the waters of the basic environment.

As another example of arbitrary placement, Michelle had no knowledge of why she was placed in the basic track when she moved to Birnam, despite earning an invitation to a private school in the Bronx before she moved. Regardless of the reason for placement, the most egregious error on the school’s part was not rectifying the issue
once it became clear that she did not belong in the basic track. In ninth grade, learning was frustrating for Michelle because, as she admits, “I would do things that I already learned. I felt like I wasn’t learning anything new, just repeating stuff I already knew.” Though Michelle immediately developed an attitude of resentment toward the expectations of the school, she did not speak up because she assumed that she was placed correctly. In addition to the struggles of acclimating to a new school environment, Michelle also says, “I felt like I didn’t belong, like everybody was behind in the class, but I was on task. I was ahead because everything was pretty easy.” Even though she was ahead and earning good grades, she remained at that level. Overall, she viewed the basic environment as a class that is “too slow unless you really need to catch up on skills. Otherwise it doesn’t move fast enough.” In hindsight, she laments not speaking to her teacher or guidance counselor about her placement, but she also remains very frustrated with the school’s lack of transparency toward her initial placement. With an equal amount of shame, anger, and frustration, Michelle finished our interview with a telling reflection: “I don’t know why I was put in a basic class, but I wish I never had been.”

Clearly, the basic model, because of how students were tracked, was not working with the discipline. Students like Michelle were improperly placed while others were tracked because of IEPs or behavioral issues. With over 20 years of experience teaching students in the basic track, Nancy has been able to discern many of the flaws regarding the school’s methods of tracking. From her point of view, “you cannot put that many low achieving regular Ed. students in a room together. A low achieving regular Ed. student is someone doing it willfully whereas a low achieving IEP student just can’t grasp the concepts. It’s a very different bag.” By distinguishing between the two groups of
learners, Nancy is clearly frustrated by the students “doing it willfully,” in comparison to the IEP students who want to learn but are frustrated and struggling. Given this divide, she—and other teachers—may approach the IEP students with more patience and focus, paying less attention to the behavior issue students, which may only frustrate them further.

In terms of her experiences in the basic classroom with these two groups of learners, Nancy goes on to note, “That doesn’t make for a good dynamic, something that is going to work. I don’t think I have ever viewed basic as a win-win. I just don’t think, by no fault of this district, at heart the dynamic was functional; on paper is one thing, but in practice it’s another.” Yet, it seems the district should have some accountability for tracking students based on behavior rather than achievement, though I will argue later that the two sometimes go hand-in-hand. Nancy was so frustrated by the evolution of the basic dynamic that she went to the head of the guidance department and demanded “one basic class with the discipline issue students, and another class for the kids who really want to learn.” While practically—and perhaps legally—this could not be done, it nevertheless planted a seed in the mind of the administration that something wasn’t working with the system as it existed. A veteran teacher in the school, Nancy clearly possesses tremendous clout with the administration if she was able to influence them as she did. It is interesting that one teacher could have such an impactful voice, and it raises flags about why the administration was not previously aware of the problem. In this case, Nancy’s observations benefited the school, but imagine how other teachers, with an equal amount of influence, might use such a powerful voice.

Taking her placement concerns further, Nancy discussed how the basic track
changed over the years. She explained how she “was okay with it years ago with classes of nine and 10 kids when all of those kids had the same goal: to get out of high school so they could get their mechanic job or trade job.” However, “when basic became this vast dynamic with too many issues, it stopped working.” As class sizes increased and more behavior issue students were placed into basic along with special education students with IEPs, Nancy became more frustrated with the system:

I've taught basic for a long time, and the only time it was really bad, was because the kids were real discipline problems. I never had a bad year in basic because the kids were just strugglers. That I can work with, but I can't work with behavioral issues in a small class; I can't do crowd control, and that is what was wrong with the model. You have to spend all your time doing crowd control, and the kids you needed to help don't get what they need. One year I had 23 kids in the basic class—13 had IEPs, and they worked their butts off; they did everything they could to learn and improve, and the other kids were discipline problems. Ultimately, the IEP kids are the ones who passed and the “regular Ed.” kids are the ones who failed.

Nancy's anecdote makes clear the divide that existed in the basic track and the impact that it had on the students who wanted to learn. Her notion of constant “crowd control” harkens back to Christopher’s description of students who banded together to subvert his authority. Along these lines, he admitted that his students “articulated to each other that the teacher won't be able to accomplish anything if they keep up the nonsense, and that was what they tried to do for the first month of school.” The influence that these students had on the class environment was a direct result of the school erroneously placing them in the basic track, leaving the teachers with a major uphill battle. With this in mind, Nancy admitted that “even with a 58 minute period, you could not facilitate what those other kids needed with all of the distractions and all of the discipline issues. That's why I fought for basic to go away because the kids who deserve to be taught were not able to get what they needed.” But a larger issue underlying the statements of Nancy and
Christopher is the question of what to do with behavioral issue students? Would these "regular Ed." students behave differently if they were all bunched in one classroom? Would that really increase their motivation? Or, are their behavioral issues a product of their frustrations—a mechanism for coping with their inadequacies? These are important questions for teachers to consider as they attempt to better manage their classroom environments.

**The Basic Label: Self-Perception**

While the somewhat arbitrary placement of students into the basic track clearly impacted the classroom dynamic, the label of the class—basic—also directly impacted the ways in which the students perceived themselves within the school community. In fact, 25% of the 67 students who completed a questionnaire felt that the term "basic" held a negative connotation within the school. Even more telling, though, is that 11 students left this particular question blank.⁸ It is very interesting that so many students could not articulate a response to this question, perhaps because they had never been asked to think about their place in the school. Additionally, this struggle with self-reflection illustrates the lack of voice that these students possess when they cannot self-advocate, cannot change because they are unable to express what's wrong. For the 25% who did take issue with the label, many were able to establish a clear picture of the tracking hierarchy at Birnam High School. One student believes that "if you are in basic you have a disorder or are dumb, if you are in [college preparation] you are average, and if you are in honors you are seen to be smart and work oriented."⁹ This student, a basic writer for three years, not

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⁸ See Appendix A, number 5.

⁹ When quoting student responses from the questionnaires, I will assign masculine gender to all students to maintain anonymity.
only establishes basic students as less than “average,” but also qualifies them as “dumb.” These words carry tremendous weight and demand we revisit Mike Rose’s characterization of the “basic writer”:

We still talk of writers as suffering from specifiable, locatable defects, deficits, and handicaps that can be localized, circumscribed, and remedied. Such talk carries with it the etymological wisps and traces of disease and serves to exclude, from the academic community those who are so labeled. They sit in scholastic quarantine until their disease can be diagnosed and remedied (210).

The parallels between the student’s use of the term “disorder” and Rose’s description of “disease” and “quarantine” highlight the ostracizing impact that labeling can have on students. Clearly the basic students in both examples are marginalized from the rest of the “average” students who, at the college preparation level and above, don’t struggle with “specifiable, locatable defects” (Rose 210).

Other examples from the questionnaires substantiate this negative perception further. A second student who also moved through the basic track for three years defined the class levels as “dumb, dumber, dumbest.” The student goes on to say that “if you were dumb, you took an honors class. If you were dumber you took [college preparation] for normal kids, and if you were the dumbest you took basic. This student, unlike the previous one, gives no intellectual credit to anyone in the school. His entire perception of the school environment is negative, and even the honors students, who are usually defined as the smartest, are simply “dumb”. This student’s limited and isolated experiences at the basic level have produced a cynical outlook that comes from being totally impotent in the classroom. Like other students in the basic track who “protect themselves from such suffocating madness by taking on with a vengeance the identity implied,” this student avoids suffocation through his cynicism (Rose 29). With no self-
esteem, or power, or voice, this student can only define everyone else in the school according to his level. The broader implications of this are staggering if this cynicism is carried beyond the classroom into the world later in life. What will happen to this student and others with a similar mindset when they need to make political choices or other informed decisions? Ultimately, because this student feels so powerless and is too scared to admit that other people have power, he maintains the “dumb, dumber, dumbest” paradigm for the school structure, keeping himself somewhat secure as a part of the “dumb” whole.

Additional telling data concerning the perception of the basic track comes from the college preparation students themselves. The following responses are from students who spent their entire high school careers at the college preparation level and answered the question about labeling based on perception alone. One student writes, “As a C.P. student I feel “smarter” at English or at a “higher level” than those in basic.” Building on the connection between level and intelligence, another student says, “The label matters because friends assume you are either smart if you are in college preparation or stupid if you are in basic. If I was in a basic level I would honestly feel dumb.” As with previous examples, the use of the word “dumb” to describe the basic track student is very disconcerting especially coming from college preparation students who have not been part of the basic environment and have nothing tangible to base these assertions on. Taking this idea further, another college preparation student reveals that “if you are in basic you feel stupid and people say that you have the easy life.” By generalizing that “people say,” this student shows the pervasive effect of labeling that dominated Birnam High School before the basic track was removed. The fact that 25% of the students who
were surveyed revealed an issue with the label “basic” speaks volumes, and their previously unheard voices have made clear the divide that existed between the “dumb,” “stupid,” students who “have the easy life” and the “normal,” “average,” “higher level” students who are “smarter” than the basic students.

Before the basic track was removed, teachers of basic English classes were aware of the impact that the label had on students. Of the teachers I spoke with, all agreed that the connotation of the term basic, which implied a minimal knowledge and skill level, tied directly to the students’ sense of self. According to Cliff, the basic students “knew that they were in a different category from the others. They viewed themselves with a distinct difference between how a CP kid viewed himself in relation to an honors kid, versus how a basic kid viewed himself in relation to a CP kid.” If the college preparation kid was average, the norm, as Cliff discussed earlier, then the honors student was above average; however, this comparison was not problematic because the college preparation kids, for the most part, were completely content at that level. The leveling became an issue because the college preparations kids, as Cliff says, “Viewed themselves as the typical kids, and the basic, in many ways, viewed themselves as having problems, being much slower, and the basic kids went below the norm.” In terms of his experiences in the basic classroom, Cliff believes that when basic students “encounter difficulties, they seemed to be more readily willing to say that I am encountering these difficulties because I don’t learn well, or I’m stupid, or that’s why I’m here in basic.” Cliff’s description of the connection between class level and perceived intelligence echoes the dynamic that many of the students described themselves.

The specific experiences of Michelle and Eric at the basic level also illustrate the
impact that labeling had on students. Even though Michelle clearly didn’t belong in the basic track, her two years at that level, according to her, “made me feel like I was lower than everyone else in the school because people say that basic kids are not as smart as everyone else.” Michelle’s choice of the word “lower” to describe her placement yet again reveals the sense of community exile that the basic students experienced. Aware of the perception that basic students are “not as smart,” Michelle says, “I felt that I could do better—that I had more potential than what the class let me do.” Michelle is very self-aware and knew that she was being held down, but she was powerless—at the time—to change her situation. Eric, too, felt out of place in the basic environment: “You don’t want to go to your friends and say that you are in basic. It’s embarrassing because most kids are in C.P. and very few are in basic. They would think, not that I’m a lesser being, but I’m less intelligent than them.” His embarrassment, like Michelle’s, stems from the fact that the basic track is the outlier, the minority. He is part of the “very few” who are perceived to be slower and less intelligent. Eric believes that the issue with the basic environment “comes from the fact that there are levels—basic and CP—and people know what they mean. If a CP class is more challenging and harder, so they are better than people in basic.” By suggesting that CP students are somehow “better than people in basic,” Eric illustrates a mindset that was informed by labeling. The students may be doing higher level work, but that certainly doesn’t make them “better” people. His comments, though, reflect a deep understanding of how tracking and labeling influenced students prior to the removal of the basic track.

**The Basic Label: Motivation**

“Students will float to the mark you set” (26).
In addition to impacting the students' self-perception, the label basic also influenced their motivation in the classroom. Since the basic track was below the college preparation level, the students viewed it as an environment with less work and lower expectations. According to one student, "The class labels only let you know how much work you're going to have to do not the level of difficulty. We all learn the same material. Each level just does higher level work." Unfortunately, many of the teachers possessed the same mindset and failed to realize that "the expectations of learners and teachers powerfully influence what happens in school" (Shaughnessy 275). Over time, the low expectations and the lack of motivation associated with the basic track yielded exactly what Shaughnessy describes in *Errors and Expectations*: 

> It is a truth both reassuring and disturbing, reassuring because it reminds us that not all students who have been judged academically inferior are necessarily or natively so, disturbing because however unsound such judgments may be at the outset, they do tend gradually to fulfill themselves, causing students to lag behind their peers a little more each year until the gap that separates the groups begins to seem vast and permanent (275).

In considering the "academically inferior" label basic, Michele, Gerald, and Eric all believed that it influenced behavior and achievement in the classroom and led to the "vast and permanent" gap that was created between the basic and college preparation track. 

A major factor that seemed to limit motivation at the basic level is how easy the work was for most students. For the most part, this seems a product of low expectations on the part of the teachers. According to Michelle, "Basic classes are supposed to be easy, and teachers are really easy on the kids. The teachers explain everything piece by piece and break it down for you, but it's really slow and so much more could get done." While it has already been established that Michelle was erroneously placed in basic,
which most likely made it an easy class for her, it is important to note that she maintains
the common perception that “basic classes are supposed to be easy.” Gerald, too, saw
basic classes as “a lot of fun and not a lot of work. It was a very relaxed, laid-back
environment, without a lot of intense work,” though he laments that there “was not
equinor enough challenging work—or overall work.” Finally, from Eric’s point of view, “basic
means an easy A class where you don’t have to do as much work as CP or honors. You
can do very little work and get Bs but do more work for an A. Many of the kids thought
Cs and Ds were decent as long as they passed. They didn’t do much work.” This lack of
motivation as a product of low expectations illustrates why a gap was created between the
two levels. With such apathy and complacency, many of these basic students barely
passed, hardly learned the material, and really didn’t care about how it would impact
them in the future. Michelle believes that this mindset has its roots in the common belief
that “since it is basic and a lower-level class the students are not expected to do any work
that’s better, so they just get lazy and choose not to do it. Everyone thinks that basic kids
are not as smart as everyone else. It affects how they behave in the class.” Michelle,
very insightfully, recognizes Shaughnessy’s belief that consistent “unsound judgments”
about the typical basic student “do tend gradually to fulfill themselves” (275).

Realizing the importance of expectations, Nancy agrees with Bartholomae’s
notion that basic should not be “a course that is necessarily prior to or lesser than the
mainstream course” (183). According to Nancy, “I always thought for me
philosophically, pedagogically, that basic needed to be run as a college prep class with
modifications—not a basic class. I never looked at it that way. I took my similar college
prep curriculum and made that work for the kids.” Nancy admitted that maintaining this
high level of expectation was difficult and often frustrated students who, prior to entering her 11th grade class, had previously experienced the “easy” basic classes mentioned above. She told me that students “definitely weren't used to working that hard,” but, as she said, “I never allowed my basic class to be any level of expectation—never too high, and I never said you’re dumb, and I never wanted anything below college preparation with modifications.” Based on Nancy’s experiences, there was no clear sense of teacher unity in terms of expectations for the basic level in the English department. If students were experiencing easy classes with low expectations in ninth and tenth grade, then naturally both they and their 11th grade teacher would be frustrated with a new level of expectation. As a further example Nancy used students who previously had received credit for just completing an assignment:

They wrote something, and they received credit. Now they're being asked to do something according to a real frame and being held to that rubric. That's where they fell apart. For example, if we're talking about responding to a text, they may read an article choosing something that interests them and all they want to do is summarize it. I think that over time if they did at least that previously they got credit. Now when they move into the upper grades where the stakes are higher, it led to a certain amount of frustration.

This disconnect in terms of teacher expectations clearly had a profound impact on student motivation. On one hand, it is hard to blame students for doing the bare minimum if that is all that had ever been expected of them, but on the other hand, they should be able to adjust to a new level of expectation, if motivated properly by the teacher.

In what became a cultural understanding at Birnam High School, the basic students did not complete, nor were they really assigned, out of class work, which again lowered the expectations of the basic track students. To understand why this happened, it is necessary to look at both the teacher and student perspectives. Cliff reveals from his
experiences that “basic students, overall, were not motivated to take what they’ve done in
the classroom home beyond the classroom walls like homework assignments and
projects. They were less likely to complete things out of school in general than college
preparation level and honors level kids.” While students in college preparation and
honors were being held to high expectations, the basic students were not. According to
Cliff, the basic students struggled with organization and preparedness. The majority of
students, he says, “come to class unprepared—without their current text, a notebook, and
often even without a pen or pencil. This was such a frustrating, common occurrence that
I really narrowed my expectations to keeping them motivated with class work where I
could control the environment.” As an example, Cliff uses one of his tenth grade
American Literature classes: “The class was extremely energetic when we were dealing
with the Revolutionary period and the Deists; for some reason they really grasped onto
that. They were very excited about that, but they didn’t want to complete any work at
home.” Despite their successes in the classroom, Cliff was still clearly frustrated by their
lack of motivation toward out of class work. Again, this begs the question that if these
students were held to a higher level of expectation from day one in ninth grade, which
involved consistent homework, would they still behave this way and maintain this
mindset throughout high school?

The students, too, confirm that not much homework was given, and when it was,
it was drawn out over a period of time to make it easier. Michele, Gerald, and Eric were
all frustrated by the expectations of their teachers and the lack of motivation of their
peers. Michelle says that “no writing out of class was given. There was very little
homework given probably because kids wouldn’t do it. They barely did work in class.”
While she was a highly motivated student who wanted to be challenged, the other students were not so motivated and thus brought down the level of expectation. Like Michelle, Gerald wanted to be challenged more by his teachers. He admits, “There was not much homework at all, which bothered me a little, but I learned a good deal in class.” Though Gerald, like some of Cliff’s students, did engage fully with the class work, he never felt completely tested by the few homework assignments, which, as he says, “were stretched out to a few weeks making it really easy. I could start it and forget about it and then get it done before it was due.” The length of these deadlines, according to Gerald, essentially kills the credibility of the assignments, and students have no motivation to complete them until the last minute. In the most telling example of expectations, Eric likens the basic environment to a daycare center. He says, “Overall, I felt like I was being babysitted in basic. I was given assignments in class that were easy, and I did them. I had to do very little at home. It was just killing time and trying to keep people in control.” Just as frustrated as Michelle and Gerald, Eric did not even begin to reach his potential because of the low teacher expectations.

With so much emphasis placed on in-class work in the basic track, the behavior and performance of the students is tied directly to the expectations of the teacher. In theory, all teachers want to maintain a high standard of expectation, but as Nancy says, “The angst and the difficulty in teaching the basic class at times became that they probably could’ve done it or got something out of it if there weren’t so many other negative things going on.” Going back to the dynamic established by arbitrary placement, the basic classes became very tough to manage. To make matters worse, very often the newer teachers—as is the case in many schools—were assigned the challenging
basic classes while the more veteran teachers were rewarded with honors level classes. On one hand the new teachers suffer from a lack of experience and lower their expectations to compensate, and on the other, they experience extreme frustration and burn out rather quickly by being thrust immediately into this complex and challenging environment. Nancy, who has been teaching basic classes for 20 years, still struggles with classroom management and maintaining high expectations, so imagine how difficult it must be for a beginning teacher.

From their experiences, both Gerald and Eric recognize how classroom management and teacher expectations are linked. For Gerald, when he was trying to learn the material in class, he says that often, "some kids were behavior issues that really distracted me, and sometimes they really tried to get off-topic because they were not really motivated to do the work. People who didn’t want to read were talking and being annoying, so it was very frustrating reading in class.” Likewise, Eric says that students in his basic classes "joked a lot—it was the way they are. It was very annoying and they made lots of jokes to try and side-track the teacher. As much fun as it was, some days we didn’t get anything done. In 9th grade, they picked on a few kids—bullying them—and it was annoying.” The common thread in both examples is students attempting to get off-topic. The constant joking, bullying, and distracting must have been extremely frustrating for the teachers who had to spend time policing this behavior rather than teaching. Eric saw that his teachers wanted to have higher expectations, and he says, “It seemed as if the teachers wanted to prepare us to move on to college preparation. They didn’t want to keep us in Basic, so they were motivated to help us.” The problem, though, from his perspective, is that “there were lots of distractions and we got side-
tracked all of the time because of those students that dominated the class.” By the end of the year, the students were not where they needed to be in terms of basic skills, so they continued on the basic track. Gerald and Eric’s examples raise a few questions: Are these students behavior issues because they are not motivated? Or, are they not motivated because they are not being challenged? And, examining this further, when they are challenged, do they react with frustration because they do not have the necessary skills to succeed? Finally, from a teaching perspective, do the teachers feel prepared to teach the students the required skills and also challenge them appropriately?

**Developing the Basic Writer**

“These students traverse course after remedial course, becoming increasingly turned off to writing, increasingly convinced that they are hopelessly inadequate” (211).

--Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary*

The greatest frustrations for both teachers and students at the basic level manifested most clearly with writing. Even though the basic classes were relatively small—ranging anywhere from 8-15 students—and students received individualized attention, writing still felt like a “crushing bore” for most (Rose 211). At Birnam High School, writing at all levels (basic, college preparation, and honors) revolved around four major writing units—one per marking period. Each unit was process-based and had a particular product at the end that varied in length and expectation depending on the level of the class. Of these four units, the only one that students typically enjoyed was the personal

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10 The four units are Personal Narrative, Literary Argument, Response to a Text, and Literary Argument with Research.
narrative. In fact, 83% of the students who completed questionnaires wrote that personal writing was their favorite. Regarding the students in his basic classes, Cliff says, "When it came to personal writing, whether it was a journal entry or something like that, they seemed to be more able and willing to go deeper and to go further and to put more words on paper with that than with other types of writing." The experiences of Gerald and Michelle prove this trend further. Gerald agreed that personal writing was his favorite because "it's the easiest things to write about—writing about myself and my personal experiences, I can come up with plenty to say without needing to do research." Similarly, Michelle says, "Personal is best because I can relate to it more and I don't have to research. I can write more and go on about my personal experiences." Both students clearly enjoy personal writing because all of the examples, the support, come from their experiences alone and not a text or some form of research that they need to think about critically. Eric, on the other hand, prefers writing about poetry and not his personal experiences. As he says, "I don't like talking about myself and things I did. I like the challenges of poems and coming up with ideas even though it's hard." Unlike Gerald and Michelle, Eric shies away from his own experiences and prefers to focus on the experiences of others in poetry. While he would not elaborate on his aversion to personal writing, he thus serves as an interesting counterexample to the 83% who prefer personal writing.

Part of the problem with non-personal writing was that most basic classes were comprised of a small group of struggling learners, which limited the overall potential for student-centered learning that is found in larger, more diverse classes. However, according to Cliff, "In a class of eight, if the teacher elicits the points of view properly
and strategically from the kids as well as supplementing different points of view that aren't necessarily offered by the kids, then you can have the same number of points of view and perspectives as you might in a class of 18 or 20.” Class size, though, did become an issue at Birnam because teachers, rather than “[eliciting] the points of view” from the students and teaching them how to think critically, were instead simply teaching the students what to think.\(^{11}\) In this context, by “asking questions, exploring different positions, considering others’ ideas, and generally going beyond the information given,” students can develop a more critical perspective toward a subject, and in turn, have more success with their writing (Durst 94). However, given the frequency of teacher-centered instruction in these classes, the students’ experiences at Birnam align with Durst’s findings that “many students [were] indeed quite comfortable with the commonplaces, finding strength and security in received wisdom,” but, when it came time to write, they struggled to “develop the critical, reflective tools needed to question the commonplaces and go beyond the received wisdom” (94). Therefore, because of “the close connection many composition scholars have come to see between writing and intellect, and the priority they assign to working with students on the latter in order to help develop the former,” many basic students struggled with academic writing because they struggled with independent thinking (Durst 93).

To illustrate the connection between critical thinking and writing, I asked Gerald and Eric about their most frustrating writing assignment. Interestingly, they both agreed that it was a comparative essay dealing with *Bodega Dreams* and *The Great Gatsby*—an

\(^{11}\) In his text *Collision Course*, Russel Durst defines critical thinking in the classroom as a skill that “requires certain intellectual dispositions or stances, habits or patterns of mind, all of which demand intense engagement with one’s subject matter” (93).
essay that requires “complexity of thought, preparation, and sustained attention” (Durst 108). Both students struggled with this assignment in 11th grade because the texts were challenging and the assignment had many parts. Regarding their specific frustrations, Gerald says, “I struggled to find the similarities and differences, and I didn’t feel prepared coming into 11th grade to do this. The kids in the class didn’t have much to say about the books, and it was hard for me to find and remember details on my own and go back and find them for the essay.” Gerald was clearly lacking the reading, thinking, and organizational skills required for an essay of this caliber because “such writing must be built systematically, conflicting position examined, one’s own developing views related to those of others, evidence generated and then sifted through, generalizations critiqued” (Durst 108). Gerald, from his previous English classes, did not possess this necessary skill set.

In Eric’s case, he says, “I had trouble reading the books and we didn’t discuss them that much. Plus, I had never written a paper like that before so I bombed it. We had lessons about research and citing but I just wasn’t that into it.” Because Eric lacked interest in this rather challenging assignment and was frustrated by the steps along the way, he shut down and resigned himself to “[bombed] it.” Had he heard the ideas of others and used them along with his own, or had the teacher supplemented the discussions with his or her own ideas, perhaps Eric might have been more interested. Both Gerald and Eric struggled with writing about literature because, in their basic classes, they had neither a forum to discuss, develop and test their ideas before they had to write about the texts, nor a teacher to strategically push their thinking further. Ultimately, these two examples adhere nicely with Shaughnessy’s belief that “precisely
because writing is a social act, a kind of synthesis that is reached through the dialect of discussion, the teaching of writing must begin with the experience of dialogue and end with the experience of a real audience, not only of teachers but of peers” (Shaughnessy 82).

Along with deficiencies in critical thinking, many students lacked the proper motivation that was required for higher level writing assignments. Even though all writing units were process-based, the students still struggled to complete them, as seen in Eric’s failure with the comparison/contrast essay. After years of teaching this writing curriculum to basic students, Nancy maintains that “writing definitely was something they couldn't wrap their brain around. Just doing a paper of scope and process was problematic.” Knowing that her students would get easily frustrated with anything other than personal writing, Nancy explains how she approached the more analytic assignments: “The basic is a population of kids that needs writing broken down into parts, and I told them that if they do the parts the way I've broken them up, then I promise that the end product will be a very manageable thing. But they wouldn't do it.” Part of the problem here is that teaching writing in this manner makes it a very mechanical, almost artificial task, rather than something more fluid and authentic. Students may feel patronized by this process as though they are being forced to ride a bicycle with training wheels.

Despite this possibility, Nancy attributes this lack of student motivation to previous teacher expectations and the overall culture of the basic track:

If they hand something in, regardless of how they do it, they want credit for it because that is what they are used to. They don't get that the steps we give are there to help them. The process to many of the basic students is tedious and frustrating because they literally don't have the patience and the follow-through.
That's where I think the biggest struggle for basic student is—the patience and the follow-through. And if they stayed on the basic track, then I don't think they were held accountable.

While this lack of "patience and follow-through" could be a product of poor motivation, it could also be a manifestation of writing and thinking deficiencies. If, for example, I were forced to play baseball, and I did not have the necessary skills or the proper instruction to do so effectively, then I would certainly find it a "tedious and frustrating" task. Students, then, may not have the patience to persevere because they are overwhelmed by frustrations that they can't effectively articulate. As a means of survival, of staying afloat, they reproduce work that has been successful for them in the past. While some accountability can rest with the previous teachers and their expectations, Nancy might consider other ways to motivate her students, which could begin with her diagnosing their specific writing frustrations and perhaps reconsidering her step-by-step process approach.

Equally frustrating for the teachers of basic classes was the students' lack of concern for purpose, audience, and development. Nancy, Cliff, and Christopher provided telling examples of students who struggled to meet the needs of particular assignments, mostly because they couldn't distance themselves from what they perceived to be the end-all, be-all of writing: the five paragraph essay. In Nancy's experience, "students have a great difficulty understanding that when they write different types of papers, they need to be doing different things and they need different structures, different types of thesis statements, etc. And when kids are struggling, they always fall back on what they know—the five paragraph essay." For Cliff, this is not so much a matter of understanding but rather a learned experience. He says, "If students get a good grade on
a paper one time writing a certain way, then they think they can repeat that on any assignment regardless of the directions; they'll keep doing it that way and see if it works out. When students do write with this mindset, the typical type of essay that they repeat over and over fits neatly onto two pages—and nothing more—and is completed in school, in a computer lab.

In terms of writing development, Christopher finds that students put an idea down on paper and think that should be enough. He explains, “I've tried really hard to convey the concept of ‘unpacking for your reader;’ I tell them that the reader doesn't see what you're thinking; you need to help him or her along with that.” His description of unpacking aligns with Shaughnessy’s notion that “since teachers can read only words, not minds, they cannot judge the ‘fit’ between what a student intends and what he has written” (80). For many of his students, Christopher continues, “this idea is extremely frustrating because they don’t want to take the time to revise and develop their ideas further.” Like Nancy, Christopher attributes this lack of “patience and follow-through” to student attitude and fails to consider actual ability. At the heart of this struggle to put more words on paper, or to revise what is already there, could be the teacher’s “[assumption] that the writer is conscious of what he wants to say; otherwise he cannot judge how close he has come to saying it” (Shaughnessy 80). Teachers may fail to consider the frustrations of the writing process taking place in the mind of the writer. Conceivably, then, students simply put words on paper and call it a day because they don’t have the thinking and revising skills required to develop a more thorough and critical piece of writing. If this is indeed the case, perhaps there is a relationship between student motivation, attitude, and ability, which could explain why so many basic students
essentially did the bare minimum, reproducing the simplest writing structures that they knew.

Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of writing, though, for teachers and students was attention to mechanics and error. It is clear that most basic students were concerned only with getting an assignment done and not with revising and editing. To force conscious revisions in terms of mechanics, Nancy collects rough drafts and includes a mechanics section in the rubric for the draft. Many students argue with her that they shouldn’t lose points on a draft for errors, but she remains steadfast in her system. “If they are not going to correct it now, then I know they won’t to do it later. But it’s a process, and for the struggling kids I want to see them correcting and revising as they work along.” Despite these clear expectations, many students simply don’t revise their drafts and hand in the final copies with the same errors. This ultimately becomes punitive for the students because, as Nancy says, “the rubric for the final product clearly details the mechanical section in the number of points they get, which is based on the number of errors.” In Nancy’s system, then, students are assessed based on the specific number of errors that they make, which can be very problematic for students who don’t understand grammatical rules.

Moreover, from Christopher’s perspective, he attributes the students’ issues with mechanics and their overall lack of editing to that fact that they either “can’t wrap their brains around certain concepts, or just don’t care about learning the rules.” Like Nancy, he finds that most basic students refuse to revise and edit their drafts, and even though he takes the time to correct their errors with marginal notes on the drafts, the students, as he says, “for the most part completely disregard my comments and don’t internalize the
corrections.” One issue, here, could be the process by which he delivers these marginal notes. Christopher uses a key system where letters correspond to grammatical rules. For example, “R” equals run-on and “P/A” equals pronoun/antecedent agreement. Though Christopher begins the years by introducing the key and explaining the rules reflected on it, his system assumes that all students initially internalize these rules. If a student forgets what pronoun antecedent agreement is, then he or she will not benefit from seeing it in the margins. As a hybrid type of system, Christopher might consider blending his key system with student conferences so that they can review the marginal notes with him and ask questions if anything is unclear. Moreover, he may consider varying his grammatical expectations on different essays to eliminate what Shaughnessy calls “an absolute standard of correctness” (119). To avoid overburdening students with error and to maximize their ability, “a teacher must ask not only what he wants but what the student is most ready to do and what, from a reader’s viewpoint, is most important” (Shaughnessy 120). By working with students in this more systematic approach, teachers can hone in on the most important needs of their students.

To understand exactly why students have such a seeming aversion to mechanics and error, it is necessary to look at the experiences of Eric and Gerald. Eric observes that “many kids just write what they want to get it done and to get a grade. In basic class they don’t care about the grade if they pass it. Also, on the final draft, we can’t do anything to fix the errors and mistakes so we just discard it until next time with the next assignment. The teachers don’t realize that kids just look at the grade and throw the paper out.” Most basic students, in Eric’s experience, are clearly not concerned with getting good grades but only with passing, which is a mindset produced by the basic student’s desire to
systematically move through the tracks and eventually graduate. Unlike many of his peers who threw out their papers and simply "discarded" their mistakes without internalizing the issues, Eric paid attention to his teachers' corrections but that did not improve his control of grammar: "Teachers would correct my grammars, but they never go ahead and get down to the core of it and try to fix it. They would say this was wrong and that was wrong, but they never actually take the time to really fix the grammar.”

With English as his second language, Eric must have been extremely frustrated by not experiencing improvement with his grammar despite his continued effort. From these examples, basic students were clearly held accountable for their writing mechanics, but perhaps there was not enough actual grammar instruction taking place. If the teachers never "[got] down to the core” of the errors, then all of the corrections in the world are useless. That Nancy and Christopher took the time to note errors and to make corrections is clear; however, whether they actually deconstructed the errors for the students and taught the specific rules remains unclear.

Like Eric, Gerald was consistently frustrated with writing mechanics and how his teachers, at the basic level, dealt with these issues. He says, "I'm really bad at spelling and have not had much help with it. It really slows me down and frustrates me while writing, and I lose my thinking.” Perhaps Gerald would have benefited from Nancy’s strict attention to mechanics during the process portion of the assignment. However, because teachers have not helped Gerald to understand spelling rules or to at least make him a more confident speller, his entire writing process is stifled and held hostage by his insecurities with spelling and error. In Shaughnessy’s words, “The student lacks confidence in himself in academic situations and fears that writing will not only expose
but magnify his inadequacies” (85). Indeed, in Gerald’s experiences, each writing assignment has further developed his “inadequacies”. Naturally, rather than focusing on ideas and development, Gerald’s mind remains tied to spelling. His situation parallels the issues with error that Harris describes in *A Teaching Subject*:

Students must learn not simply how to avoid mistakes but how to write in ways that engage the attention of educated readers. Teachers need then to respond to what students are trying to say, to the effectiveness of their writing as a whole, and not simply to the presence or absence of local errors in spelling, syntax, or usage. Correctness thus becomes not the single and defining issue in learning how to write but simply one aspect of developing a more general communicative competence (83).

Gerald is clearly lacking in this “more general communicative competence” because he not only lacks ideas about which to write but also struggles with getting words down on paper, which might then make him unable to “engage the attention of educated readers” (Harris 83). To complicate his situation further, he says, “When I get papers back with errors, I think that I should have done it better, and I get mad at myself for not doing it, and it frustrates me that we can’t re-edit it and get a better grade. It bothers me that all the comments from the teachers are about mistakes that I made.” Because his teachers seem to focus only on “the presence or absence of local errors in spelling, syntax, or usage” and not his actual ideas, Gerald finds only the negatives in each assignment (Harris 83).

Both Eric and Gerald clearly struggled with the mechanics of writing, and they became increasingly frustrated over the years by their teachers’ unwillingness—and perhaps inability—to explain the actual grammatical and spelling rules. This is particularly interesting when cast against the previous claims of Nancy and Christopher that they consistently focus on revision and mechanics. A fundamental flaw of the basic
track clearly is that students blame the teachers for their struggles with grammar while
the teachers blame the students for not paying enough attention to mechanics and error.
Yet, underlying all of this tension is the fact that poor writing is still associated with
grammatical error, with little attention paid to actual content. This disconnect does not
make for a productive environment, and clearly, no one was benefiting from it. Both
groups, then, need a more clear balance for revision. The teachers need to refine their
marginal notes so that they address both content and mechanics; in turn, students need to
then engage more actively with those comments, perhaps through actual conferences.
Ultimately, because of this divide between student and teacher, Eric, Gerald, and
countless other basic students, came to feel “hopelessly inadequate” because of how
writing was taught at the basic level (Rose 211).

Moving into the Mainstream

Based on the various ways in which the basic track was failing to help students catch up
with basic skills, a shift in philosophy was clearly warranted. In eliminating the basic
track, the school administration decreed that all students would take college preparation
English or higher. A shift of this magnitude impacted both students and teachers alike,
and the focus of this section is to examine the implications of this change to a more
mainstream approach. To introduce and frame the logic behind this shift, Cliff
synthesizes why tracking was not working:

There is a very distinct profile of a graduate of Birnam High School who was
tracked in the basic level all four years versus a kid who was tracked in college
preparation throughout high school. There are kids I’ve seen as tenth graders
who had very similar ability levels in basic. One kid wound up moving to college
preparation in 11th grade and honors in 12th grade. He made a very conscious
decision to move to college preparation in 11th grade, which is great. Another kid
who had a very similar profile to him in that class just didn’t want to move to
college preparation and stayed in basic throughout high school, but he had a very similar skill set to the one who moved up; he lacked the motivation. It would be interesting to see what would have happened to that kid if he moved to a college preparation class in 11th grade.

Cliff’s overview hones in on the fact that the basic track was not maximizing student potential, and it was creating “basic” students according to the culture of the school. Now, however, with all previous basic students taking college preparation, Cliff’s “what would have happened” hypothetical scenario can take shape for all students. The question remains, though: has this shift actually benefited the basic track students to the degree that the administration believed it would?

In many ways, the shift has benefited the basic track students. A dramatic shift for this group of learners was the change in class size. For three years, these students had experienced the basic environment where class size ranged from 8-15 students. Now as seniors in the college preparation classroom, the average class size is 24, with some reaching 30 students. While this is a dramatic increase, it provides the basic students with a more dynamic learning environment with more student-centered learning. With the larger college preparation classes, the students can engage more with each other, relying less on the ideas of the teacher and more on their own critical thinking skills. This is essential to each student’s development, especially with writing, given how little attention critical thinking received at the basic level.

In making the shift from basic to college preparation, the increased class size was particularly rewarding for Michelle who admits, “I feel that it’s better to be in a larger class because there are more ideas and there is more interaction of students because

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12 When I refer to basic students in this section, I mean those students who were in the basic track before the mandated shift to college preparation.
people are paying attention to the work and are more interested since everyone is collaborating.” In comparing her experiences as a student in basic with those of college preparation, Michelle says, “Class discussions are more focused than basic. In basic the kids don’t really pay attention and don’t have much to say. They talk about what they want to talk about rather than what the teacher is talking about.” By associating the college preparation environment with collaboration and the basic environment with inattentive kids “who don’t have much to say,” a clear line in the sand is drawn between how those two tracks function. Overall, Michelle believes that “it helps a lot to hear so many different ideas. It’s easy to understand the concepts and easier to write about them. Basic is just thinking on your own without other people giving their opinion.” Michelle’s experience of college preparation as a collaborative community versus basic as a thinking and learning in isolation experience establishes a major reason why the basic track was supplanted by college preparation.

From a teaching perspective, Nancy believes that students benefit from increased class sizes as well, especially in terms of grouping students and differentiating instruction. In considering last year’s basic class of 11 students, she admits, “The kids get more individualized attention when you have a smaller class sizes, but it’s too small with too many limited kids, and there wasn’t enough to be done with them because we had too many weak groups with basic.” Just as Michelle believes that the basic environment is limiting in terms of student-to-student interaction, so too Nancy views group work at the basic level as restrictive given the narrow perspectives of the students. On the other hand, in her college preparation class of 23 mixed ability students this year, she has been able to group the students in beneficial ways so that, as she says, “It’s not as
clear who the struggling students are and who’s more advanced.” Because the basic students are mixed this year with the college preparation students, Nancy does what she can to unify the group as a cohesive whole. Moreover, to enhance the critical thinking in each group, Nancy says, “Usually, I group them so that each group has a strong, a medium, and a weak student. By weak, I mean a struggling student who I know is going to do the work versus a kid who is just lazy and is not going to do it.” This flexibility with grouping and the level of differentiation are afforded primarily because of the class size and the diversity of the student participants.

Despite the increased class size, there are fewer discipline issues with the basic students folded into the college preparation environment. While managing a classroom of 25 students is no easy task, it is nevertheless easier in many ways than policing a small class of attention-seeking basic students. According to Nancy, “There are not as many discipline issues unlike in basic with a smaller class, which was a more captive audience for discipline problems. Now there are too many other kids in the class to capture their attention.” Yet, Christopher admits from his experiences this year that some basic students still try: “The stereotypical class clown basic student who is in the classroom still tries to get that reaction and creates a scenario to get that reaction. But the reaction of his classmates is not the same in college preparation.” Christopher’s repetition of the word “reaction” illustrates the need for attention that certain students crave. However, in the much larger college preparation classes, they are often unsuccessful. From Eric’s point of view, “kids in college preparation are better behaved and it’s better to be in a college preparation class overall. There are less people who act up during class, and it’s mostly because the people who fool around in class never do their work and are ok with
getting lower grades." Eric, too, acknowledges that students may attempt to capture the attention of the class, but they only wind up hurting themselves. To some degree, Eric is more comfortable in the college preparation level and less frustrated compared to his basic classes where, as he says, "The other basic kids would always get me distracted with their behavior."

The improved student behavior is undoubtedly a product of increased student motivation. Like Nancy, Cliff attributes the negative behavior of basic students to the frustration that they experience, when, as he says, "you take a group of your most struggling kids, and you move them into the same room. Logically, how do you expect them to rise up? They feed off of each other." Now, though, with these students in a larger environment, their behavior changes because the classroom culture has changed. Cliff elaborates further using college preparation students and honors students as an example:

You see the same thing in an honors level class where you have your top kids in the same room. I've seen kids in 10 CP move to 11 honors—a great CP student who wanted to give honors a shot. The nonsense that he tried to pull as a CP kid, when he did it in honors, the rest of the kids didn't buy into it. He cut it out right away. What he got away with in CP, the joking around, he had to stop in honors; the joking around didn't cut it. The culture wasn't there for him in the honors class, and he wound up doing fine, but the culture of the classroom shifted because it was a class of all highly motivated kids.

This model fits perfectly with what is happening at the college preparation level now. What the basic students previously got away with simply isn't tolerated at the college preparation level. As Christopher admits, the students initially test the waters, but since the overall "culture of the classroom" is now different—especially in terms of motivation—the poor behavior receives little attention. Behavior that previously
received laughs, approving gestures, and praise, now is met only with frustrated and confused stares of students who want no part of the distracting behavior.

A contributing factor to the increased motivation of the basic students is the elimination of the term “basic”. These students not only strip themselves of the negativity associated with the basic label, but also immerse themselves in a college preparation, mainstream environment. By simply moving away from the margins of the school community, many of these students develop a completely different mindset. From Nancy’s perspective, “I do believe that the kids, when they knew it was basic, set a certain bar for themself because it was basic whereas this is college preparation.” To illustrate how the bar is raised by the change in label, Michelle and Gerald consider their transitions from basic to college preparation. Michelle sees student motivation and achievement tied to teacher expectations: “In college preparation, you are expected to work higher so students have that mentality that they should work better rather than being in basic where they only do the minimum at the most.” Even though she admits that the work in basic was much easier, Michelle enjoys the challenge of college preparation because, as she says, “it makes you think to a different extent so you have to work harder, and I think that’s better because it prepares you better than being in a basic class and staying at the same level.” Like Michelle, Gerald relishes the opportunity to reach new heights of intellectual achievement at the college preparation level. Though Gerald could not articulate how the label college preparation makes him feel, he determines that in the new environment, “the expectations are higher, the work is more intense, the essays are longer, and it is overall more rigorous.” Gerald offers a final point of comparison between the two tracks that once again illustrates how the difference in level and label
ties to expectation and motivation: “In college preparation, the expectations are higher because we are in a more advanced class and the work is supposed to be harder than the basic class. This year, my teacher has motivated me with the work, but I’ve also struggled to keep up with the more difficult assignments.”

Other students, still, have experienced increased motivation and self-perception simply by deeming themselves worthy of college by making the transition to the new classroom environment. Because of the stigma associated with the basic track, most basic students aspired—at best—to graduate high school. However, by simply changing the class label, some students no longer viewed themselves as basic, but as capable. To a large degree, this has to do with teacher attitude and how impacts the students’ self-perception. According to Philias Yara,

> What teachers like or dislike, appreciate and how they feel about their learning or studies could have a significant effect on their students. Unfortunately, however, many teachers seldom realize that how they teach, how they behave and how they interact with students can be more paramount than what they teach. In a nutshell, teachers’ attitudes directly affect students’ attitudes. Teachers’ attitudes are in turn, influenced by their culture and belief system (364).

If a teacher culturally does not believe in the basic track or does not want to teach such a class because of past frustrations, that teacher’s attitude is going to determine the way in which the students view not only the class itself but also themselves. Likewise, if a teacher does not believe that basic students should aspire to go to college, then his or her students will maintain that same mindset. Specific student examples substantiate this connection further: One student who completed a questionnaire echoes this sentiment saying, “I feel like in basic classes, I am a level under the normal and basic classes are much easier. Now in a college prep class, I feel like I am right where I’m supposed to be getting ready for college.” Another student connects the change in label to his increased
motivation: “Being in college preparation English makes me work harder to better myself as a writer so I can go to college. In my basic class, I never thought about college because I didn’t think it was an option.” Though both students felt marginalized by the basic track, they clearly feel liberated and motivated by the college preparation environment, and most likely, the attitude of the teacher.

Anecdotally, teacher Christopher offers another example of a student whose entire school experience changed for the better when she moved from basic to college preparation:

She was a basic student up until this year who had never taken a college prep class, in any subject; I got a phone call from her parents explaining how much she has grown and learned from being in the college preparation, mixed-level class, only because she’s never been exposed to the standard of what a college preparation level class is. They told me that she really wants to go to college, so the idea of this being a college preparatory class motivates her.

Though this student took only one college preparation class in her entire high school career, it clearly had a profound impact on her future goals. For this student and for the other two, their entire notion of life after high school was altered because of the change in class label. Moving forward, imagine the impact that mainstreaming all students will have when they will no longer know what it feels like and means to be basic.

Even though removing the basic track has clearly benefited many students in terms of critical thinking, motivation and self-perception, there are still major issues with writing that need to be addressed. Many of the students, who are experiencing college preparation expectations for the first time senior year are struggling to stay afloat. Administrator Cliff believes this is a product of “the gaps that were created when there was no 12th grade basic option when the transition began, and kids who had three years of basic previously, entered a 12 CP class. That’s very difficult for those kids because for
three years they were taught at a lower level, with lower expectations than the rest of their peers, and this is very difficult for the 12th grade teachers.” Given these “gaps,” especially as they pertain to writing skills, the teachers have struggled to meet the needs of all students in the mixed, college preparation environment. Christopher offers a scenario to illustrate how these ability gaps impact the expectations of his class and the performance of the basic students:

If I have students write a two-page paper, it would be assigned at the beginning of the week and may be due at the end of the week. However, it would not be uncommon in many of the basic classes for that paper to then have many stages that were understandably targeted at working the students through the writing process. The training wheels were never taken off by the time the class was over so the students became accustomed to being spoon-fed every step of the way through the writing process, being forced to do each step of it, and in CP, by 12th grade, that’s really not the standard any longer. Certainly there are still outlines and drafts, but I can’t hold their hand and check every step of the way any longer in a 12th grade college prep level writing experience.

While the writing units at the college preparation level are still process-based, the expectations are higher and Christopher makes clear that teachers cannot “spoon-[feed]” the basic students any longer. What Christopher is referring to here is the basic-level approach to process writing that Nancy describes earlier where students follow the fill-in-the-blanks method of writing, essentially having the parts fed to them. Michelle acknowledges this shift in expectation at the college preparation level by saying, “There were more deadlines. It was more strict. Writing assignments had to be done better with higher expectations and more of the work was done on our own. We have work to do as preparation for college and we feel more advanced than basic.” The college preparation experience not only challenged Michelle but motivated her to work harder with college as a viable option. She is thus a prime example of a student who felt limited by the basic writing process and liberated by the college preparation expectations. In summing up her
college preparation experience, Michelle says, "I had to work really hard. Many times I wanted to give up on my research and I-search papers because they were so hard. But I never did. I always kept myself motivated with how bad basic was." Interestingly, Michelle used her frustrations with the basic track to motivate her at the college preparation level.

While Michelle felt liberated by the transition to the college preparation level, other students resented it. In this case, their resentment echoes that of many first year college students who are forced into a mandated composition course. In an essay titled "Composition’s Ethic of Service, the Universal Requirement, and the Discourse of Student Need," Sharon Crowley critiques such a required course and the ways in which it essentially has students, through their writing, conform to the ideology of the institution. The purpose of the course, she says, is "to make student writing available for surveillance until it can be certified to conform to whatever standards are deemed to mark it, and its authors, as suitable for admission to the discourses of the academy” (229). This course, she suggests, has a notoriously marginalizing impact on students because it "serves to underscore and reinforce the exclusivity of academic discourse” (229). In a similar way at Birnam High School, students who needed basic skills work were forced into the basic track so that they could become better acclimated to the reading, writing, and thinking skills required of high school level discourse. These students, as mentioned earlier, did receive basic skills work, but they were working below grade-level standards and they felt the negative effects of the track’s remedial connotation.

With the removal of the basic track and the inclusion of all students into college preparation classes, the school seemed to be suggesting that all students were prepared
for “admission to the discourses” of the school (Crowley 229). However, it is clear that
many students resisted this because they did not possess the language and the writing
skills necessary for such a transition, and they were subsequently marginalized within the
new environment. To compensate, many students forced the basic track expectations on
the college preparation teachers. From what he observed as an Administrator during the
shift, Cliff notes, “In some classes, because of student resistance, the writing assignments
were shortened, the quality of the writing was lessened in terms of what was expected.
The length of time that an assignment would be developed over was shortened, or a
shorter assignment was lengthened with many multiple steps. Either way much of the
rigor and the responsibility was taken from the students.” Even though all students were
taking college preparation English classes after the shift, it is clear that some of them
became water-down versions of what they used to be. The impact that the basic students
had on the college preparation classroom is clearly problematic because many of the
“basic” students resented both environments. They felt trapped, labeled, and
marginalized by the basic track, yet when they were liberated from it and moved into the
college preparation environment, they resisted the new expectations and the intellectual
challenges that it presented—most likely as a defense mechanism from being
underprepared.

Although some teachers lowered their expectations when it came to writing,
Nancy refused to even when students challenged her. For example, she describes
students in her 11th and 12th grade classes who have no desire to go to college, yet they
are in a college preparation class because they have to be. For these students, she says, “I
really struggle at times when trying to differentiate without having to change the
requirements to meet everyone's individual needs. I can't change how I'm teaching for a kid who does not want to go to college or who is just plain apathetic. I'm still going to try to prepare him the same as the other students." Nancy clearly wants to maintain a certain level of rigor, but at what cost? Teaching writing in larger, mixed-ability classes like these makes it much harder to actually individualize instruction, especially given the learning gaps created by the hasty elimination of the basic track. For students like Gerald and Eric, Nancy and Christopher's unwavering expectations, along with the increased class size, come at a price.

While both students admittedly enjoyed the challenge of the shift, they found writing at the college preparation level very difficult. Eric finds that "because the expectations are so much higher, the teachers get less involved with the students as much, and they expect us to learn more on our own with ourselves, when we still need help." Likewise, Gerald believes that "teachers just don't have time to help all of the students." On the other hand, he says, "In basic, if we were reading or writing something and we didn't understand something, we could ask our teacher and she would help us in class. I would just ask and get the help." When both students have questions about their writing, they find it intimidating to get answers from their peers or from their teachers in such a large class. Eric says, "I lost my individualism that I had with a smaller class of 10, like I had in basic. If you are 1 in 25, they really can't focus on you or take in your comments as they can in a small basic class. It's hard for me to get answers." Unlike in his basic classes, in college preparation, Eric feels like an outcast, an indistinguishable number, a mere part of the whole. This frustration is evident with Gerald who similarly says, "It gets annoying sometimes because there are 26 other people who need to learn the same
things, and I can’t get the attention that I need. Also, I don’t like talking in front of the class or in large class discussions so this really bothers me.

Though no longer part of the basic track, both students still feel marginalized to a degree given the lack of attention that they consistently receive. They both struggled with mechanics and error and did not receive effective instruction even when they were in small basic classes. Now, in much larger classes, where teachers need to pay attention to many more students, it is presumable that they are still not getting the specific instruction that they need in terms of mechanics. Their teachers may be fixing their mistakes—marginally—but they may not be teaching the actual rules. Moreover, it is equally possible that they are struggling with a lack of instruction regarding their thinking. Even though they are in larger classes and have many more points of view at their disposal, if they have not received specific instruction on how to critically synthesize the various ideas, then they are going to struggle with content. This is the case, according to Shaughnessy because “when the writer moves from spoken to written discourse, he faces a formidable task of synthesis. Somehow he must sort and link and refine his thoughts along the lines that serve his individual purpose” (84). While other students may be able to “sort and link and refine” their thoughts, Gerald and Eric may be left searching for answers from the teacher, which is the approach to learning that they took in their basic classes.

This lack of individualized attention has a direct impact on the writing that both students produce. Whereas Michelle was able to overcome the harsh transition to higher expectations and see marked improvement in her writing, Eric and Gerald saw only marginal improvements. Eric can now understand concepts better by listening to his
peers, but he admits, “I don’t think my grammar or vocabulary got any better than when I was in basic.” He attributes this to the culture of the college preparation environment: “I’m embarrassed still to go to teachers to talk about my grammars and vocabulary because I know they expect more, and I don’t want them to be disappointed in me. I want the teachers to help me improve them, but I feel bad and I don’t want them spending class time just trying to help me when there is a whole class.” It is upsetting that his classroom environment produces a correlation between asking questions and feeling embarrassed. Moreover, if not reaching the expectations of the teacher makes Eric feel inadequate, then how is he supposed to improve? Once again, even at a higher level of education, Eric is still plagued by his struggles with grammar, error, and insecurity.

Gerald, too, has experienced some improvements with writing, noting, this year (senior year), “I had to write multiple, in-depth, lengthy essays with works cited, so I’ve enjoyed the challenge, but the assignments are very hard.” Yet, he acknowledges that the depth of thinking and overall development of ideas is still lacking because, as he says, “with the assignments we have, I get some attention, but I would do better with more attention to be able to go into more depth with my writing. Plus, I kept making mistakes like spelling errors or going off-topic or trying to add more information to the paper.”

Gerald is still burdened by his spelling issues that he experienced at the basic level, and his consciousness of error is still hindering his writing. In his essay “The Discipline of Composition: Making Students Smarter,” Sheridan Blau draws a connection between student attitude and writing performance: “Nothing is more likely to render a student writer incompetent than his belief that the difficulties he encounters in the process of composing are not part of the process he is engaged in but some evidence of insufficiency
in himself or in his training which renders him incompetent for the task.” Gerald’s feelings of “incompetence” with spelling, then, tie directly to his inability to develop ideas sufficiently or to view himself as a confident writer. Indeed, given the lack of interaction between him and his teacher, he is caught in writing quicksand and would clearly benefit from student-teacher conferencing because, according to Shaughnessy in *Errors and Expectations*, “The conference between teacher and student remains the best way to discover how students have perceived their instructions and to create the bonds of concern and encouragement that energize both teacher and student” (287). With the correct amount of “concern and encouragement” from his teacher, Gerald (and Eric) may feel more comfortable in the class and more willing to ask questions, seek assistance, and realize that his writing struggles are not an “insufficiency in himself,” but rather “a working condition for every author—something that comes with the territory.” (Blau).

Just as many students have resisted the transition and struggled to adapt, so too have many teachers. Perhaps the largest frustration for many of the teachers affected by this transition is that before the shift, according to Cliff, “There was no conscious upfront dialogue with the teachers about how to better help the kids. Things weren’t working and the school reacted.” Because of this hasty shift, most teachers felt that they were not adequately prepared to teach these new, larger classes with such mixed abilities. And even though the English curriculum structure allows for differentiated instruction, the teachers hadn’t been trained in it. Christopher’s experiences during the transition help to shed light on the situation:

All of last year I sort of made my own way, and I did my own differentiation based on my own coursework and my own professional reading. As a member of the professional development committee the year before, one of the things I kept writing into the plan, particularly for the English teachers, was a professional development
focus on differentiation knowing that we were moving to this model. The first year teaching these mixed classes, I had no support, and this year we did start getting professional development, but we got it while we were teaching the courses so again that's almost another lost year.

Though Christopher struggled with the transition, he was ahead of other teachers because of his Master’s coursework dealing with differentiation, and he became an important voice in the school regarding professional development. Even still, that he received “no support” is troubling, and it is easy to imagine how much other teachers, along with their students, suffered without a support system in place, causing them to miss out on proper development for two years.

As a specific example of how this shift, along with the absence of professional development, has impacted students, Christopher describes his experiences with his mixed 12th grade classes:

My 12th grade colleagues and I often discuss the difficulties of differentiating writing lessons, specifically with a focus on development of ideas. For example, if we are doing a mini lesson on development, there is a large segment of the classroom that does not need that lesson because they have already learned that in previous college preparation classes. So, we have to give them something different from the basic students, and this becomes problematic if there is not mutual respect amongst the students because many don’t find the extra work fair. As a group, we have these conversations about fairness and use the metaphor of going to the doctor and not everyone gets treated the same way, but at the same time there’s this underlying teenage feeling that it is unjust, and it’s very difficult to get past that.

While Christopher and his colleagues attempt to link differentiation with fairness to the students, they are nevertheless perpetuating the lingering labels of basic and college preparation given how they still identify the two groups of learners. By differentiating in this manner, it is clear to the students who moved in from basic and who was already part of college preparation. With the students fully integrated into one classroom community, these labels need to disappear, and teachers need to focus, as best as they can, on the
individual needs of the students. However, with all the differentiated instruction training in the world, if the teachers can’t move beyond the labels, the level of the class will never reach college preparation for all students.

Even though the teachers are only now starting to receive profession development training, there are more factors involved with their opposition to the change. On one hand, the frustration stems from a lack of communication and training, while on the other, according to administrator Cliff, “It keys into a cultural resistance to integrating a basic and college preparation level course.” What Cliff finds most interesting about this resistance is that for years teachers were asking for differentiated instruction professional development. “For the past two years,” Cliff says, “the feedback was that they needed differentiated instruction training, but when they were offered it this year, even before the first day of training, they began resisting it.” In an attempt to deconstruct this resistance to what the teachers desired most, Cliff goes on to say, “For years, the resistance was that you can’t eliminate basic without giving us training, and now they don’t want the training, so that might be keyed into some cultural opposition to doing it this way, and it provides an easy out by always being able to have a scapegoat for why it’s not working.” And indeed, if the model is not working after the teachers receive the appropriate instruction, then who is to blame other than the administration for not holding teachers accountable?

Nancy, too, finds this resistance problematic because from her point of view, “we’ve always had mixed abilities regardless of the level, and I find it most intriguing, the resistance to it. I’ve taught 11 college preparation classes where I’ve had kids who really should have been in honors and kids who could barely read due to arbitrary
placement. Any time you have 30 kids in a classroom, they’re at different levels.” Perhaps it is more of a cultural resistance than a lack of professional development. Speaking as both a teacher and an administrator, Cliff describes the difficulty of the model as it exists: “In terms of the culture shift, the paradigm shift for the teachers is where it will be most difficult. I’ve taught all levels of courses, and I’ve taught courses where I had basic level kids in a CP class, and it’s just a matter of the skill set of the teacher and the knowledge base of the teacher to be able to cope with that, and it’s a very difficult thing to do if you don’t have the correct skills and mindset.” It is clear that moving forward each teacher’s skill-set will be developed further through professional development, but no one can be certain if each teacher will be able to transform his or her mindset to meet the needs of all learners in these more diverse classes.

Looking Ahead: Reaching All Learners by Design

The 2012 graduation marked an end to what began as a hasty shift by the administration three years ago, as the last group of previously labeled “basic” English students moved beyond the Birnam High School walls. Beginning next year, all students will have experienced only college preparation English classes or higher. This is an important moment for the administration, the teachers, and the students because—for the first time—the label basic and its attached stigma will be officially eradicated. Yet, the absence of the label alone does not remove the various ability levels of the students nor does it improve the teachers’ abilities to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all learners. With correct planning moving forward, and with a specific focus on bridging the achievement gap at the college preparation level, the school can more consciously work toward revising its current model of instruction in the English department.

A major issue with the model, over the past three years, has been the lack of data
for the administration to analyze concerning the effectiveness of the shift. From the perspective of the administration, Cliff says, "It's hard to tell if the new track is working. There hasn't been a formal study of that, and I think it's very difficult to do that because it wasn't set up from the start when it was changed." Now, though, with a curricular move toward the Common Core standards, the administration—with the input of the teachers—will be able to modify the curriculum with a specific focus on differentiation. According to Cliff, this has already begun: "Part of this year's professional development for teachers was to just get them thinking more consciously about differentiation, showing them the logic behind it—the techniques and tools that they can use in the classroom, which led to training with Common Core standards. There were discussions about how the common core can influence the curriculum and our approaches, which at least pedagogically should inform what the teachers are doing with revisions." While many teachers were initially resistant to the change and frustrated by the lack of professional development, they are now more open to the model given their stake in the curriculum revision process. Christopher, who is participating in the process, says, "We're doing the curriculum work now to revise each grade level so that each lends itself better to differentiation. Having the common core standards to work with has made the process smoother." Through the common core website, teachers have access to model curricula, entire unit plans, individual lessons that focus on differentiated instruction, along with countless other resources. Teachers now have not only a direct hand in the curriculum revision but also an extremely useful resource to guide them through the

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13 According to the New Jersey Department of Education, "The central goal of the NJDOE is to ensure that all children, regardless of life circumstances, graduate from high school ready for college and career. We believe that the implementation of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) supported by state-developed model curriculum and professional development comprise a necessary component for reaching our goal."
Moreover, because the common core focuses on interdisciplinary reading, writing, and thinking, teachers are able to work across disciplines, making the process much more of a collaborative effort. Much of this process has been streamlined by Cliff—the supervisor of secondary education—who participates in these curriculum revision meetings and mandates that teachers keep a strict focus on the new standards. He likewise stresses the significance of accountability moving forward and how important it will be for teachers to explicitly follow the curriculum. Whereas in the past teachers could take liberties with the curriculum because there was very little accountability, now it is clear to the teachers, as they are writing the curriculum, that what they produce must be followed.

While the revisions to the English curriculum are still in their infancy, the revised science curriculum can serve as a beneficial model for administrators and teachers throughout the process. As Cliff worked to articulate the science curriculum K-12, he paid particular attention to maximizing differentiation:

I think it will be challenging for the teachers to negotiate, in terms of differentiating their instruction, the spread, in terms of ability level with the kids. The helpful thing with the ninth grade physics is that every single entering ninth grader will have had a full year of an algebra-based course in eighth grade. They all will have exposure to those concepts: Some will have struggled, some will have succeeded more than others, but they all will have that background information. The program that we’re implementing is a highly differentiated program by default that really keys into the students’ individual progress and has areas of remediation already built in. So based on the structure of the program, it is set up to provide as much success to the struggling student as it for the advancing student.

Because this program challenges the “struggling” and the “advancing” students equally, it is clearly set up to benefit all learners. Moving forward, if the English curriculum is
designed with basic skill standards clearly outlined at each grade level, then there should be fewer achievement gaps since students need to demonstrate proficiency in those standards to move to the next grade level. With a clear focus on standards and a more even ability spectrum, teachers should have an easier time differentiating instruction. In this way, if done correctly, the school has reached a balance for the basic versus mainstream track question. With this approach to the curriculum, struggling students should have enough attention paid to their basic skill needs as they are concurrently held to grade level expectations. In the previous models, this harmony of skill and expectation was not achieved.

To begin assessing the effectiveness of this revised curricular model, the administration has implemented the use of “Performance Tracker,” a database that organizes student data. This year, the school began keeping track of pre-HSPA and HSPA scores along with all midterm exam scores. Next year, the school will input all final exam scores, including a specific point breakdown from the various rubrics. The exciting aspect of this program is that student progress can be tracked by discipline and by grade level. For example, because all 11th grade English college preparation students take the same midterm and final exam, student data can be compared to identify areas of strengths and weakness for the students based on the skills assessed on the exam. Teachers will be able to input specific point totals in an itemized fashion for each aspect of the exam rubric. Using performance tracker, the school can identify, for example, that on the midterm a majority of English 11 students struggled with organization of ideas. Teachers can then use this information to inform instruction as they work toward the final

\[14\] At each grade level, teachers work collaboratively to design the exams.
exam. At the end of the year, using the final exam breakdowns, teachers can use that data to inform curricular revisions for the following year. Though the program has not been used in this manner yet, it certainly has the potential to not only help the school effectively track student performance but also assist teachers in identifying the specific needs of their students.

For the past three years, students and teachers have struggled with a very cumbersome transition. In the administration's haste to remove the basic English track, it failed to consider the immediate impact it would have on the school community, with basic and college preparation students and teachers equally affected. From this analysis, it is apparent that there have been clear benefits and drawbacks for the basic students as they played an intricate role in the school's experiment. Just as Shaughnessy, and later Rose, advocated the phrase “basic writer” to soften the negativity of remedial, the administration of Birnam High School finally acknowledged the marginalizing impact of the term “basic” by removing it from the school vocabulary. Despite their increased self-perception, many of these students still found themselves on the “boundary” of the college preparation classroom, as they lacked the language and basic skills necessary for a more advanced environment. Since Bartholomae believes that “basic writers may be ready for a different curriculum, for the contact zone and the writing it will produce” (179), it is clear that Birnam took an innovative step in the right direction by mainstreaming its basic students and having them work toward “a more general communicative competence” (Harris 83).

Now, moving forward, with all basic English students removed from the school, the real key is whether teachers will completely buy into this new philosophy. With the
administration’s clear focus on professional development, specifically with differentiated instruction, teachers are now receiving the training they need most. Perhaps the greatest issue still lingering, though, is the teachers’ cultural opposition to the transition. Though there will be no history of tracking in the school beginning next year, teachers will still be aware of the ability gaps in the classroom, essentially able to identify who would have been in a basic class. If teachers continue to resent these larger, mixed-ability classes because they make instruction more challenging, their attitudes will hinder the success of the new track. In terms of teacher evaluation, it will be important for administrators to pay close attention to teacher attitude and how it impacts student performance.

Shaughnessy’s words serve as a fitting guide for both teachers and administrators to follow: “For unless he can assume that his students are capable of learning what he has learned, and what he now teaches, the teacher is not likely to turn to himself as a possible source of his students’ failures. He will slip, rather, into the facile explanations of student failure that have long protected teachers from their own mistakes and inadequacies” (292). With the evolution of this new track and curriculum, administrators must ensure that teachers are held accountable for their “mistakes and inadequacies,” especially when they result in students’ failures.

Clearly, for this model to work, teachers need to feel more comfortable, prepared, and capable, and the administration’s specific focus on transparency and assessment should be reassuring. However, nothing is set in stone as Cliff states in summing up where the school stands with the new English track: “We’re implementing the new curriculum strategically. We will monitor it very carefully to see what the successes and challenges are. We’ll get teacher feedback, look at student performance, and ultimately if
it's not working, we'll reassess and see if we need another level.” In time, then, if students cannot effectively meet grade level proficiency given the higher expectations, a revised version of the basic track could be warranted. But before making another shift of that magnitude, in assessing student performance, the administration should take a firm look at the English teachers' performance and how effectively or ineffectively they are implementing the new curriculum. Therefore, with innovative assessment tools in place and a clear, skills-based curricular vision moving forward, it seems that the English department, at Birnam high school, is now on the right track.
Works Cited


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Appendix A

Student Questionnaire

1. Please list the previous English classes and levels that you've been in at Paramus High School: (For example: 9 Basic, 10 College Prep, 11 Honors).

2. What class was the most challenging and why?

3. What class was the easiest and why?

4. In which class did you feel the most comfortable?

5. Does the label of the class—Basic, College Preparation, or Honors—have any impact on your learning or how you viewed yourself as a learner?

6. Were you more motivated as a student one year versus another? Please be specific to the year and why.

7. Did you notice a difference in teacher expectations one year versus another?

8. What is your favorite type of writing?

9. What frustrates you as a writer?
Appendix B

Student Interview Questions

Note: Students will have their writing portfolios in front of them during the interview, which is a collection of every major writing assignment that they’ve completed during high school.

1. What do you think is the largest difference between the basic environment and the college preparation environment?

2. How did being in a basic class make you feel?

3. How does being in a college preparation class make you feel?

4. In which environment did you feel more motivated? Why?

5. In which environment did you produce the best writing? Why?

6. Which environment (basic level or the college prep level) helped you more as a learner?

7. Did teachers have different expectations of you depending on whether you were in a basic or college preparation class?

8. Please describe your favorite piece in your writing folder. When did you write it (year/level)

9. Please describe your least favorite piece in your writing folder. When did you write it (year/level)
10. Please describe the most challenging writing assignment that you’ve completed.
When did you write it (year/level)

11. Now that you’ve experienced both environments, which would you prefer and why?
Appendix C

Administrator Questions

1. When was the decision made to remove the basic track?
2. What current research informed the decision?
3. How has the shift impacted the students, teachers?
4. Is there any data with student achievement since the change?
5. Have you had any feedback from teachers about their experiences?
6. Is anything being done with the curriculum to better accommodate these mixed classes?

Teacher Questions:

1. What was the hardest part about teaching a basic class?
2. What was beneficial for the basic students?
3. How would you describe the type of student who was in a basic class?
   a. Overall motivation?
   b. Self-perception?
4. What type of writing frustrated them?
5. What type of writing did they enjoy, succeed with?
6. Are students better off tracked in a basic class or mainstreamed in CP?
7. Did you receive any sort of professional development during the transition?
8. Moving forward, what specific type of professional development would you envision as helpful to your experiences with the new college preparation environment?