



INTRODUCTION

In the Palo Alto Unified School District, there is an ongoing discussion about laning within our academic structure, specifically with the Math and English lanes at Palo Alto High School and Gunn High School. Studies over the last several years have shown a growing disparity between the students who are in the 'advanced' and 'lower' lanes of each core subject. Using a survey to measure the reactions and thoughts of students will be perceptive to help determine a course of action that will satisfy not only the student body, but also the wider Palo Alto community.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Tracking students into respective lanes based on academic performance and demonstrated interest has been an increasingly popular approach for schools. Students who show exemplary work are grouped into higher lanes, while other students who do not perform at the same level are arranged into lanes with similar students. However, the vast majority of students who are a part of these higher lanes are predominately White/Asian, with a disparagingly small number of students of color taking these courses. In Palo Alto where the cost of living is extraordinarily high compared to any other part of the United States, families who struggle to make ends meet cannot compete with other more influential families and their students. When students are put into lanes associated with being 'higher' or 'lower' than the one next to them, certain stigmatizations and outlooks are created about the students who make up those lanes. A Palo Alto High School self report to the Western Association of Colleges and Schools during the 2014-15 school year found that Historically Underrepresented students were not present in AP courses compared to other students. While about 60% of Asian students regularly enrolled in one or more AP courses, while only 12% of African American and 20% of Latino students enrolled in AP courses. This trend in AP enrollment has stayed constant over the past several school years, due to the assistance and services available to White/Asian students over their minority peers, and the negative connotations given to underperforming students, further separating students of different academic and ethnic backgrounds.



Laning Affecting Paly Growth Mindset

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The research project that I am proposing is applied research, as the data that I am collecting and analyzing is to solve a central problem, not to advance my knowledge of the subject purely because I am curious. The data collected from my survey would be a hybrid of both qualitative and quantitative responses. Most responses would be on a scale, with strong positive feelings being a 5, and strong negative feelings being a 1. A couple of questions would be qualitative however, to gauge the student's response in a manner that allows them to personally respond to the question, and to elaborate in a way that a quantitative question could not. The study would be classified as an observational study, as I am not directly changing any variables, or testing anything, just asking students questions in a manner that does not promote bias or preference. Specifically this would be a historical/ethnographic study, as I am studying how certain demographics might be influenced, and am taking into consideration past data collected and responses.

Survey Questions:

- 1. What grade are you in?
- 2. How familiar are you with laning? (1-5)
- 3. What math lane are you currently enrolled in?
- 4. How confident are you in your math abilities? (1-5)

5. Do you believe your math abilities are greater, equal, or less than the lane you are currently enrolled in?

6. Do you believe math lanes have a certain stigma associated with them?

7. If so, please elaborate

8. Do you think laning should be replaced with a different system? 10. What is your ethnicity?

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

RESULTS

Looking at students math lane, we see that they are also within their projected math lanes that the Palo Alto Unified School District has defined 82% of students will be meeting or going above the district's standard for mathematics learned during high school. The students surveyed seem to be well within the normal laning parameters set by the district and also seem to be a fair representation of all students at Paly, but may be skewed by a majority of Asian students surveyed.

Moving past the demographics of students surveyed, the survey now concerns laning, 70% of students surveyed believe that laning creates a stigma around the students, at least in math lanes. However, 30% said that they weren't sure, or that they believed that laning did not create an issue in classes. One student identified stereotypes as a threat for being an issue that prevented students from changing lanes or performing well. However, when asked about if the laning system should be removed to a more traditional school system, 55% of responses said that they would not want to remove laning from Paly. 15% said yes, and 30% maybe. This reluctance to change the school system is because there is no alternative school system that would adequately meet Paly's academically rigorous system and students without holding many students back, or letting many students fall behind if they are not prepared to keep up with the rest of the class. Although students find that laning creates stigmatization around Paly, laning has become such a core part of Paly academics that it is hard to imagine Paly without it.

From this survey, we can infer that a change needs to be made to Paly's laning/tracking system, but the solution needs to be thoroughly thought so that it does not leave any students behind or students feeling like they are being held back. I think that if a special group of students, teachers, and PAUSD admins were able to collaborate in a transparent manner with the student body that would be a step in the right direction. In order to make Paly a more welcoming community that doesn't stigmatize students for not performing above the standard, laning procedures within the math community need to be more transparent. Teachers need to give their students more opportunities to move up a lane, and inform them if they don't already know. The district's recommendations from the MATD board are already a step in this new direction, but another push needs to be made within the district to create realistic solutions to this issue.

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