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An inequitable distribution of teacher talent: How micropolitics shape the master schedule

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Abstract

Each year, school leaders must balance the competing interests of students and teachers when creating the master schedule and assigning teachers to courses. Using a micropolitical lens, this study draws on interviews with 17 secondary school leaders to examine how they navigate this process. We find that the course assignment process is largely centered on teacher satisfaction, with teacher seniority— an indicator of accumulated political capital— leading to preferential assignments through both explicit and implicit mechanisms. We conclude by identifying strategies school leaders use to exercise their own organizational capital and mitigate the resulting inequities in students' access to teacher talent.

Keywords: Teacher preferences, micropolitics, course assignment, school leaders, student equity, seniority

Teacher quality varies more within schools than between them (Hanushek et al., 2005; Jeong & Luschei, 2019; Thiemann, 2018), making teacher course assignments an important determinant of the instructional quality students experience and, ultimately, their academic achievement. Research suggests that the distribution of teacher talent accounts for approximately 5-7% of within-school variation in student achievement (Thiemann, 2018). However, access to high-quality teachers is not evenly distributed across students. Low-income students and students of color are disproportionately taught by less experienced and less credentialed teachers (Goldhaber et al., 2015; Jeong & Luschei, 2019; Kalogrides et al., 2012). Because these teacher characteristics are associated with lower student achievement, such disparities have important implications for educational equity (Goe, 2007; Peske & Haycock, 2006).

While research provides evidence of an inequitable distribution of teacher talent to marginalized students, there is a lack of understanding of how these inequities arise and, more importantly, how they can be prevented. This paper considers the role of school leaders—defined here as administrators and department chairs—in the within-school course assignment process, also known as the creation of the master schedule. Although teacher course assignments are guided in part by educators' credentials, school administrators often retain considerable discretion in these decisions (Merenbloom & Kalina, 2017) and frequently incorporate department chair input. Existing research further suggests that teacher assignments are often shaped by active bargaining between teachers and school leaders (Grissom et al., 2015; Lieberman & Clayton, 2018; see also Finley, 1984). However, this work has paid limited attention to the ways in which discretionary assignment processes may reflect and reproduce structural inequities.

Throughout the assignment process, school leaders are faced with the challenge of balancing the often competing interests of students and teachers (Pittman, 2022). While teachers' course assignments have implications for educational equity across students, the assignments also dictate teachers' day-to-day activities and, for many, their career trajectories. Teachers tend to become more effective with repeated experience teaching the same course or grade level, but these gains can be diminished when assignments change (Blazar, 2015; Cook & Mansfield, 2016; Ost, 2014). In the long run, course assignments and subsequent changes affect teacher retention. Teachers who are assigned courses misaligned with their credentials, whose course assignment frequently changes, or who are assigned to classrooms with more behavioral incidents have higher rates of changing schools or exiting the profession entirely (Atteberry et al., 2017; Feng, 2010; Feng & Sass, 2017; Ost & Schiman, 2015). As a result, school leaders must weigh the potential equity consequences of assignment decisions alongside their implications for teacher effectiveness and retention.

In this paper, we examine how school leaders' priorities and discretionary decisions during the course assignment process shape the distribution of teacher talent across students. Drawing on a micropolitical perspective, we ask: *To what extent do school leaders prioritize student and teacher considerations in their course assignment decisions?* and *How do school leaders' discretionary decisions during the course assignment process contribute to an inequitable distribution of teacher talent across students?* We address these questions through interviews with 17 school leaders in the Greater Los Angeles Area who are actively involved in the creation of the master schedule at their schools. Our findings reveal that teacher satisfaction and seniority are often prioritized in assignment decisions, creating barriers to the equitable distribution of teacher talent. Given school leaders' unique position to shape the course

assignment process, we additionally asked: *How can the course assignment process be altered to improve the distribution of teacher talent across students?* Based on this research question, the paper provides insight into strategies that school leaders use to minimize educational inequities that arise from course assignment decisions.

Literature Review

While research has not examined how school leaders' responses to micropolitical dynamics contribute to inequities, a substantial body of literature documents both the approaches school leaders use to develop master schedules and the within-school inequities that result from course assignment decisions. In the following sections, we review these two strands of research that inform our study.

Approaches to Course Assignment

The existing literature on the teacher course assignment process suggests that school leaders make assignment decisions through one of two approaches: top-down or bottom-up (Cohen-Vogel, 2011; Grissom et al., 2015; Lieberman & Clayton, 2018; Merenbloom & Kalina, 2017; Monk, 1987).

A top-down approach to the course assignment process is driven primarily by school administrators and involves limited teacher input. School leaders who adopt this approach tend to impose their will unilaterally (Monk, 1987), sometimes using assignments to reward or sanction teachers. For example, principals may assign courses perceived to be more difficult as a demotion for low-quality instruction or disobedience, while reserving higher-track courses or courses with less behavioral challenges as a reward for teachers perceived as more effective (Chingos & West, 2011; Lieberman & Clayton, 2018; Player, 2010). Although these practices are often discussed in terms of their effects on teachers, they also have important equity

implications, as high-need students' access to high-quality instruction may become secondary to personnel management goals.

Alternatively, some school leaders leverage a top-down assignment approach to ensure an equitable distribution of teacher talent across student need. These leaders often give high-quality teachers more challenging students, more varied course schedules, or larger classes based on the belief that they can successfully handle the additional challenge (Barrett & Toma, 2013; Bastian & Janda, 2018; Monk, 1987). Following the same logic, some school leaders give teachers experiencing burnout more manageable courses (Monk, 1987). Unlike assignment practices that prioritize rewarding or punishing teachers, these decisions leverage the authority of a top-down approach to align teacher expertise with student need.

In contrast to top-down approaches, some school leaders take a bottom-up approach to assignment which distributes greater authority to teachers and department chairs (Merenbloom & Kalina, 2017; Monk, 1987; Paufler & Amrein-Beardsley, 2014). Under this approach, teachers typically submit their course preferences to school leaders and these preferences are generally honored (Finley, 1984; Lieberman & Clayton, 2018; Merenbloom & Kalina, 2017). However, teacher influence may extend beyond formally expressed preferences in bottom-up processes. In a case study of an English department, Finley (1984) found that teachers often withheld their true preferences because certain courses were informally viewed as the "property" of particular teachers. These informal norms were especially pronounced for highly desirable course assignments, suggesting that bottom-up processes may also shape the distribution of teacher talent in ways that have important implications for educational equity.

Inequitable Distribution of Teacher Talent Through Course Assignments

Whether course assignments are primarily driven by teacher preferences or school leaders' decisions, research suggests that student characteristics play a central role in how teacher talent is distributed. High-quality teachers are less likely to be assigned to classrooms serving large concentrations of marginalized students or those perceived to be low achieving (Clotfelter et al., 2004; Flores, 2007; Grissom et al., 2015; Jackson, 2014; Kalogrides et al., 2012).

At the secondary level, tracking practices represent one important mechanism through which these inequities emerge. Research has documented that students of color, low-income students, and low-achieving students are disproportionately placed into lower-level courses than their peers (Clotfelter et al., 2004; Finley, 1984; Flores, 2007). Because teachers tend to prefer advanced courses partially due to the belief that higher-ability students are easier to work with (Finley, 1984; Lieberman & Clayton, 2018), more experienced and higher-quality teachers more commonly receive these assignments (Clotfelter et al., 2004; Flores, 2007; Jackson, 2014; Kalogrides et al., 2012). Similarly, teachers with more credentials and leadership roles often teach higher-achieving students than their peers (Grissom et al., 2015; Kalogrides et al., 2012). This funneling of high-quality teachers to higher-level courses creates disparities in the instruction available to students based on their race, gender, socioeconomic status, and achievement.

Importantly, however, tracking only partially explains disparities in access to high quality teachers. Research has found that racialized patterns exist independent of tracking (Clotfelter et al., 2004). Black, Hispanic, low-income, and low-achieving students are consistently more likely to be assigned to teachers who are considered novice, have less credentials, scored lower on

licensing exams, or recently changed course assignments (Atteberry et al., 2017; Clotfelter et al., 2004; Feng, 2010; Flores, 2007; Goldhaber et al., 2015; Jeong & Luschei, 2019; Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Kalogrides et al., 2012; Peske & Haycock, 2006; Rogers & Doan, 2019). The disproportionate exposure of marginalized students to lower-quality teachers regardless of tracking underscores the need to understand the interpersonal dynamics that drive persisting disparities in master schedules.

Theoretical Framework

To explore how school leaders navigate tensions between student and teacher interests in assignment decisions, we examine the process through a lens of micropolitics. Rooted in organizational theory, micropolitics conceptualizes schools as small political systems in which various actors compete to gain power and influence outcomes (Ball, 2012; Malen & Cochran, 2008). Blase (1991) defines micropolitics as “the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals in organizations” (p. 265). This framework is particularly useful for understanding course assignment decisions because they involve multiple actors with competing priorities and varying capacities to influence the master schedule.

Micropolitical influence stems from actors’ access to political capital, or the resources that enable individuals to shape organizational decisions (Blase, 1991; Grissom et al., 2015). Although political capital can take many forms, we focus on three types that are particularly relevant to the course assignment process: organizational, social, and informational capital (See Table 1). Organizational capital derives from an actor’s formal position in the school hierarchy and the authority that accompanies it, as is held by principals and similar school leaders who approve the master schedule (Grissom et al., 2015; Johnson, 2001). Social capital reflects the relationships actors can draw on to advance their agenda, such as a teacher leveraging a

relationship with an administrator to secure a preferred course (Bourdieu, 1986; Lieberman & Clayton, 2018). Informational capital refers to an actor's knowledge of organizational processes, including an understanding of which decisions are discretionary or how requests are most effectively made (Blase & Blase, 2002; Malen & Cochran, 2008). While some individuals may possess more capital due to their positions or time spent at their school, political capital can enable all teachers to exert power over decisions (Johnson, 2001). Regardless of position within a given organization, however, an individual's capital has previously been found to only be influential when mobilized in interactions with others to influence an outcome like course assignments (Ball, 2012; Johnson, 2001; Malen & Cochran, 2008).

Table 1. Relevant Forms of Capital for the Course Assignment Process

<u>Form of Capital</u>	<u>Definition</u>	<u>Application to Assignment Process</u>
<i>Organizational Capital</i>	Actors hold varying amounts of formal authority based on their positions in hierarchical organizations (Grissom et al., 2015). Organizational capital describes an actor's direct power in decision-making processes.	1. A school principal has a large amount of organizational capital based on their oversight of all other school employees. 2. A teacher promoted to department chair gains additional organizational capital based on their new assignment and responsibilities.
<i>Social Capital</i>	Social capital describes the power that comes from building and maintaining relationships with others (Bourdieu, 1986).	1. Teachers may leverage their relationships with school leaders to receive their preferred assignments. 2. Social relationships can help foster a positive working environment that eases conflict between teachers regarding desired course assignments.
<i>Informational Capital</i>	Increased knowledge about how power is exercised within a school provides actors with informational capital (Blase & Blase, 2002; Grissom et al., 2015; Malen & Cochran, 2008). The longer a person works at an organization, the more information they have about how decisions are made and how they may influence that process (Grissom et al., 2015).	1. A teacher who knows that their school leader uses a bottom-up approach to assignment may leverage that knowledge to ensure that the department chair advocates for and gives them the courses they prefer to teach.

Prior research has used micropolitics to examine how teachers influence course assignments. Schools are understood as political systems where school leaders must consider the demands and political capital of teachers, students, and parents in their course assignment decisions (Grissom et al., 2015; Wirt & Kirst, 2005). Studies find that teachers actively draw on social, informational, and organizational capital to secure preferred placements (Ball, 2012; Grissom et al., 2015; Johnson, 2001; Malen & Cochran, 2008). For example, Grissom et al. (2015) found that more experienced teachers often leverage their accumulated capital to influence decisions. These teachers tend to have superior informational capital through their familiarity with school processes, greater organizational capital due to leadership roles, and more substantial social capital through school-based relationships (Grissom et al., 2015). Similarly, Lieberman and Clayton (2018) found that teachers actively utilize their friendships with influential school leaders to drive the assignment process. While teachers may engage their political capital to influence their assignments, those with leadership positions must consider how utilizing organizational capital over fellow faculty members may drain social capital (Struyve et al., 2014), highlighting that micropolitics can embody both cooperation and conflict (Blase & Blase, 2002; Iannaccone et al., 1991).

This study extends prior work by shifting attention from teachers' efforts to influence assignments to school leaders' perceptions and responses to those efforts. We examine how school administrators and department chairs engage their own organizational capital while navigating the social, organizational, and informational capital held by teachers. Because organizational, social, and informational capital accrue with tenure at a school (Grissom et al., 2015), we also consider seniority as a visible marker through which school leaders encounter and respond to teachers' political capital. While prior research has emphasized the active

mobilization of capital (Grissom et al., 2015), less attention has been paid to whether political capital can shape assignments without being deliberately exercised. We therefore use a micropolitical framework to examine how school leaders navigate competing interests and both active and implicit forms of influence during the course assignment process.

Data and Methodology

To investigate our research questions, our team conducted interviews with school leaders on how they assign courses and balance student and teacher interests. We recruited participants through a combination of purposive (Seidman, 2006) and snowball (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) sampling. To be eligible, a school leader had to work in the Greater Los Angeles area and have participated in the course assignment process at least once prior to the 2022-2023 school year. We focused on the Los Angeles region given the demographic diversity commonly observed in its schools. Because three of the researchers had worked in local public schools, we were able to leverage professional connections to reach eligible participants and expand the sample through referrals. This approach was particularly advantageous for a study of power and politics, where rapport helps alleviate social desirability bias that such topics invite. The resulting sample included 17 school leaders from 13 secondary schools. Each participant provided written confirmation of informed consent to participate in the study. Notably, seven of the 17 participants were department chairs, positioning them as school leaders while continuing to actively teach, thereby providing our data partial coverage from the perspective of faculty (see Table 2 for information on participant demographics and roles).

Table 2. Respondent Characteristics

Participant	Role	School	School Level	Gender	Race	Age Range	Years in Education	Years in Leadership Role
1	DC	A	HS	F	W	61-65	36-40	26-30
2	DC	B	HS	M	W	31-35	6-10	1-5
3	DC	B	HS	M	A	36-40	11-15	1-5
4	AP	C	HS	F	W	41-45	21-25	6-10
5	DC	D	HS	M	W	41-45	16-20	1-5
6	DC	D	HS	M	W	46-50	26-30	11-15
7	P	E	HS	M	B	46-50	26-30	16-20
8	AP	F	HS	M	A	46-50	21-25	6-10
9	AP	G	HS	M	B	36-40	11-15	1-5
10	AP	H	HS	M	W	41-45	11-15	1-5
11	DC	H	HS	F	A	41-45	16-20	6-10
12	AP	I	HS	F	W	46-50	26-30	6-10
13	AP	J	HS	F	W	46-50	16-20	11-15
14	P	K	HS	F	A	41-45	21-25	6-10
15	DC	L	HS	F	W	26-30	6-10	1-5
16	D	M	MS	F	L	31-35	11-15	1-5
17	AP	N	MS	F	W	41-45	16-20	1-5

Notes: Roles: DC = Department Chair, AP = Assistant Principal, P = Principal, D = Director;
Race: A = Asian, B= Black, L = Latina/o, W= White

The interviews were semi-structured in nature, with a common protocol anchoring each discussion and follow-up probes tailored to the participants' roles and responses. The protocol covered two domains. The first explored the mechanisms of course assignment and the actors involved at their school, including teachers, department chairs, and administrators. The second

portion elicited participants' evaluations of the process, covering topics such as how effective it was at matching teachers with courses they were suited to teach, how equitable it was for teachers and students (those in advanced and remedial courses), as well as their suggestions for change. Interviews were 30-60 minutes in duration and were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The interviews were analyzed using a hybrid thematic analysis that combined deductive and inductive coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Following each interview, members of the research team wrote analytical memos capturing high-level impressions and themes (Miles et al., 2014). These memos informed the addition of inductive codes to the deductive codebook that the team derived from prior research on micropolitics and teacher assignment processes (Grissom et al., 2015). Utilizing the codebook, we analyzed interview transcripts in Dedoose. To support the trustworthiness of the coding process, each transcript was independently coded by two team members, who then met to compare their codes and resolve discrepancies through discussion (Campbell et al., 2013). Additional inductive codes that emerged from the analysis and collaborative sensemaking were also added to the codebook and contributed to our findings. Following analysis, our team consolidated the coded data into the three themes presented in the findings section.

Limitations

While the findings are drawn from a rich set of interviews, it should be noted that, in most cases, they reflect only the assignment process in high schools. While we sought to understand the process in middle schools as well, our sample only included two middle school leaders. Despite their underrepresentation in our sample, these participants meaningfully

contributed to our overall understanding of the assignment process, which led us to include their interviews in this study.

Positionality Statement

This study was conducted by education researchers, all of whom have previously worked in public schools in varying capacities, one in the role of department chair. The study was initially motivated by the former department chair's experience witnessing the significant role that interpersonal relationships and informal power systems played in course assignments. This background contributed to the team's ability to recognize how capital operated informally in participants' varied accounts. The same experiences, however, posed a threat to confirmability in which the researchers' expectations would shape the findings rather than participants' accounts (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). To mitigate this risk, the team engaged in reflexivity, consensus coding, and analytical memos, which enabled team members to contest one another's analyses by making assumptions visible (Berger, 2015). Through this process, we sought to uncover how participants both engaged their own organizational capital and negotiated the political capital of other actors in the course assignment process, shaping student access to teacher talent.

Findings

Across schools, leaders acknowledged that the course assignment process does little to guarantee student success and equity. One school leader explicitly shared: “[the assignment process leads to] an inequitable distribution of teacher talent. I don't think we're using our skill sets properly.” Echoed by several others, school leaders revealed that they believe instructional quality is not evenly distributed across course levels or student populations, which has implications for which students are set up for success.

The following sections provide insight into the micropolitical dynamics that contribute to educational inequities in the course assignment process. Given school leaders' acknowledgement of the inequities that arise, we also expound on effective and feasible strategies to alleviate inequities for students.

A Teacher Satisfaction-Centered Process

Although not a mandatory step in the course assignment process, all school leaders reported collecting teacher preferences. They tended to do so through surveys or informal conversations. The leaders attributed the inequitable distribution of teacher talent to their prioritization of teacher preferences and satisfaction in their assignment decisions.

The Importance of Teacher Satisfaction for Efficacy and Retention

The school leaders opted into the collection of teacher preferences based on their beliefs about how teacher satisfaction contributes to teacher retention and instructional quality. In the face of teacher shortages, school leaders prioritized teacher preferences out of fear that teachers would leave the school if they were not satisfied. While school leaders traditionally hold a great deal of organizational capital, allowing them to dictate teachers' assignments, the scarcity of teachers constrained the decisions school leaders felt comfortable making. This organizational capital became less effective when leaders faced staffing challenges because going against a teacher's wishes risked attrition. One department chair reported that a teacher threatened to quit if they were not given the grade assignment that they had requested. This experience highlights that retention concerns shape the political capital of both school leaders and teachers in the assignment process, thereby increasing the importance of ensuring teacher satisfaction through course assignments.

While school leaders generally shared that “teacher desires drive way too much of the decisions that we make,” some did argue that ensuring teacher satisfaction is important for instructional quality. One school leader noted that they “feel very strongly that people are the best teachers [when] they're teaching what they love.” Another administrator agreed, sharing that “teachers are going to do a better job if they're teaching classes that they're most comfortable with, so I do want to make sure that teacher preferences are taken into account.” These comments highlight that while the collection of preferences does overtly center teachers in the creation of the master schedule, assignments can also be intended to indirectly benefit students.

Variation in Enacting Teacher Preferences

Similar to the variation observed in school leaders’ motivations for collecting teacher preferences, we also observed variation in how school leaders responded to these preferences. School leaders who followed a bottom-up approach largely adopted the preferences of teachers or the recommendations of department chairs, unless there were logistical issues that required different placements, such as a teacher leaving immediately before the start of the school year. In cases where a teacher’s preferences could not be met, most school leaders who took a bottom-up approach held discussions with affected teacher. As explained by one school leader: “It's very, very, very rare that I'll make a change without having a conversation with the department chair and the teacher who is being assigned that class.” These practices contributed to school leaders’ beliefs that they were successful in maximizing teacher satisfaction. One assistant principal explicitly noted that in the year of the interview they “only had one teacher out of a certificated staff of 125 teachers who was dissatisfied with her teaching life.”

While maximizing teacher satisfaction by adopting preferences was typical of school leaders who took a bottom-up approach to course assignment, the process of collecting teacher

preferences was found to be more performative in schools with a top-down approach. One principal who took such an approach noted that they met with teachers in advance to discuss which courses they would most likely be assigned to teach, resulting in teachers requesting courses that matched what the school leader desired. In this case, the principal sought to shape stated teacher preferences to ensure they would not need to make unilateral decisions that could drain their social capital with teachers.

Overall, the extent to which teacher preferences were earnestly considered varied amongst school leaders depending on their approach to assignment. One department chair explained this dynamic as they worked with various administrators:

It's my responsibility initially, to say, okay, assign these courses to the teachers in my department. I turn that in to administration and then the experience varies depending on who my site administrator is. At that point in time, sometimes it's entirely at my discretion. Sometimes it gets blown up. Sometimes it's a negotiation where they come to me with a 'here are our concerns' and we work it out.

This variation highlights the dependence of the assignment process on the approach taken by the highest school leader overseeing it, usually the principal or assistant principal. However, despite this dependence, we found that teacher preferences were consistently one of the top priorities of school leaders in their course assignment decisions.

The Greatest Source of Capital: Seniority

However, not all teacher preferences were weighted equally. The preferences of teachers with seniority were consistently prioritized in school leaders' assignment decisions over newer teachers. The longer a teacher remained at a school, the more political capital they accumulated through seniority. As highlighted by our theoretical framework, seniority reflects the accumulation of all three forms of capital: the organizational standing that accompanies senior roles, the social capital of established relationships and the respect that accrues with tenure,

along with the informational capital of knowing how assignments are made and can be influenced. In this study, we found that seniority influenced course assignments at all but one school. However, school leaders acknowledged this influential source of political capital in two very different ways, explicitly and implicitly, which are described in the following sections. In this discussion, we also acknowledge that other teacher attributes influence course assignments; however, their consideration does not mitigate the uneven teacher satisfaction that arises from seniority's central role in decision-making.

Explicit Seniority

In this study, the political capital associated with seniority was highly prevalent and influential in the course assignment process. Approximately half of the school leaders explicitly acknowledged that seniority was an important part of their school's process, whether enacted by themselves or others. As explained by one school leader, seniority often plays out in a manner in which "the more senior teachers tend to get their way." The pervasive nature of this practice is highlighted by one school leader who noted that seniority is a common consideration across many schools: "Historically speaking in my career, it has been incredibly important. At my old school, the oldest teachers would pick their classes first, and then everything else kind of just got slotted down."

While several school leaders told similar stories, most did not make a value judgment regarding the practice. Rather, seniority was accepted as a priority engrained in the course assignment process. In one case, however, a department chair argued that honoring seniority is important for the "purpose of morale and keeping people feeling like they put in their time, they served a purpose here, and that we care about them." This assertion mirrors the rationale that was given by many school leaders as for why they prioritize teacher preferences in the assignment

process. However, in this case, the justification for seniority was never tied to improved instructional quality or student benefits.

In most cases, school leaders acknowledged that seniority functioned as a funnel of experienced teachers to advanced courses such as those with AP or Honors designations. One school leader described that at their school, newer math teachers “start with Algebra I and Geometry” and “work their way up to Algebra II” before eventually earning the right to teach advanced courses such as Pre-Calculus and AP Calculus. Through this process that was meant to sustain the satisfaction of senior teachers, students in the lowest level courses consequently were assigned the least experienced teachers. Thus, the explicit prioritization of seniority in decision-making had implicit trade-offs with student interests.

Through the explicit valuing of seniority, trade-offs were also made with the satisfaction of more novice teachers. One department chair expressed concern that consideration of seniority may harm newer teachers. Reflecting on their own experience, the department chair shared their frustration at not being able to teach advanced courses: “So there was never going to be the opportunity for me to break into [advanced] classes unless that teacher left, and like five other teachers left, because it was all going to be seniority.” This experience illustrated that seniority was often a respected form of political capital that heavily influenced assignments for the purpose of sustaining teacher satisfaction, but it could also negatively affect the satisfaction of less senior teachers.

Implicit Seniority

Given the trade-offs associated with prioritizing seniority in decision-making, some school leaders staunchly refuted the importance of seniority. One department chair stated “I’ve never made a decision based on seniority,” and another claimed that “the last thing I look at is

seniority.” While such sentiments were echoed by approximately half of school leaders, one person admitted that, while they did not incorporate seniority into their decisions, teachers at their school nonetheless perceived seniority to be an important factor. This disconnect is reflective of implicit seniority, where school leaders did not consciously consider seniority when making assignment decisions, but by maintaining the same master schedule across years, more senior teachers retained coveted course assignments.

Numerous school leaders who claimed to not consider seniority clearly described their school environments as settings where continuity was important and maintaining the status quo was expected. School leaders succinctly explained this phenomenon with statements such as “teaching assignments don’t tend to change from year to year that often” and “honestly, our master schedule doesn’t change that much...typically, we have teachers teaching the same thing year after year.” One department chair additionally explained that at their school, teachers are more or less locked into their course assignments when hired, noting that “for the most part, teachers teach what they are originally assigned to.” These accounts suggest that continuity may function as an indirect mechanism through which seniority shapes assignments without the explicit invocation of political capital.

The purpose many school leaders ascribed to status quo maintenance speaks to the first finding of this paper, that centering teacher desires is perceived to be of great importance to teachers. One assistant principal explained that “once the teachers have been established at a certain level, they don’t like to change too much.” Other school leaders similarly deferred to the idea that teachers did not wish to change their course assignments, which they believe should be respected. This belief system leads to continuity across years and the implicit prioritization of seniority in course assignments.

The stories of several school leaders further illustrated the ingrained nature of implicit seniority in the assignment process. One school leader explained that continuity at their school meant that teachers had unstated claims on their prior year course assignments, noting, “They have the right of refusal. They [also] have the right to give up their assignments if they want to.” The affordances of seniority became an informal entitlement, without needing to actively invoke any political capital. This practice was found to be respected by school leaders and when change was suggested, it was often met with resistance. One department chair specifically described clashing with a new school administrator who planned to switch teachers off their long-taught subjects:

He came in, and he said, “You know, I see some of your teachers have been teaching the same grade level for a lot of years. I think it's time we start shaking it up and having people teach different classes.” And I asked him, “Why would we do that? If they love what they're doing now in their content? And it would just make them upset?” And he said, “Wow, that wasn't...the answer [I] expected.” And he never talked to me about it again.

This fight to maintain the status quo highlights that course assignments remain teacher-centered even through systems of implicit seniority. Here, the department chair’s choice to mobilize their own organizational capital was influenced by the senior teachers’ social capital. That is, this department chair used his leadership role to protect senior teachers’ preferences and maintain their satisfaction without their direct involvement.

While largely guided by an interest in satisfying teachers, some school leaders did describe implicit benefits for students. One school leader argued that teachers maintaining consistent course loads was desirable because “you can’t be a great teacher if you don’t do it for a while...and get used to doing one thing...we want a sense of continuity for the students and for the teachers as well.” Participants argued that assignment continuity may support instructional effectiveness by allowing teachers to deepen expertise within a particular course over time.

At the same time, some school leaders recognized that it is sometimes in students' best interest to disrupt the status quo, particularly when teachers are not providing adequate instruction in their current assignments. Yet, we observed hesitancy to disrupt continuity, even when a teacher was perceived to be low quality, with the exception of advanced courses. School leaders were more likely to change teachers' assignments when they received complaints in advanced courses, which were optional for students and had implications for the school's reputation, than when similar complaints were received for lower-level, required courses. One department chair explained that their school occasionally reassigned unsuccessful AP teachers to lower-level courses to minimize parent complaints, noting, "I know, certain teachers may not want to teach the lower levels, but...they will have to teach a lower-level class because they might get a lot of parent complaints." In these cases, negative interactions with parents undermine teachers' social capital. As parents of high achieving students are key stakeholders in schools whom personnel seek to satisfy, these teachers' course preferences become at risk. Similarly, expounding on the importance of continuity and having successful AP teachers, one school leader said:

I'm not going to tell the teacher that you can't teach AP US History anymore just because I want a younger teacher to teach it, especially if they're doing a good job. If their test scores are doing well, and their kids are finding success, I'm not going to take that away from them. Typically, as far as if we move more veteran staff, it's typically because of either their longitudinal AP data or because there's just not enough students to take that class. So it's one of those two reasons.

This excerpt highlighted that, while school leaders prioritized the satisfaction of senior teachers through the maintenance of the status quo, they were willing to interrupt status quo if senior teachers were underperforming in advanced courses that were central to the school's reputation. In both cases, negative course-level outcomes (parent complaints and student achievement) were the conditions under which a senior teacher's standing was challenged.

Uneven Teacher Satisfaction

Although the prioritization of senior teacher preferences may sometimes be disrupted by school leaders' consideration of student success, there remained uneven teacher satisfaction based on seniority. Through the implicit and explicit prioritization of seniority in assignments, the immediate preference of new teachers was deprioritized relative to their more senior colleagues. One department chair recounted their experiences as a new teacher: "I was basically just told, this is what you're teaching. This is what works, period." Another department chair described having five classes of struggling students "pretty much dumped on [her] plate" when she was hired. These experiences demonstrate the relatively limited influence of new teachers in the course assignment process, with novice instructors assigned to courses that their more senior colleagues did not want. One school leader explicitly acknowledged that this is a result of new teachers being "lower on the totem pole of seniority." New teachers' position was the inverse of the senior faculty: they held little organizational standing, had not accumulated social relationships or collegial respect, and lacked the informational knowledge of how to influence the course assignment process. While the centrality of seniority leads to a lack of influence over assignments for new teachers, it does theoretically leave them with the promise of future satisfaction once they achieve seniority. In the meantime, without capital to mobilize, and no status quo in their favor, they absorbed course assignments that more senior colleagues declined.

Some school leaders noted that the best way to improve teacher satisfaction would be to tackle issues of seniority. One shared that they would like to get to a point where each teacher had "a fair schedule when any person would be willing to take another person's schedule and just be happy with it. Because there's nobody that kind of has the 'cake schedule' and somebody else that has the difficult schedule."

Based on the existing disconnect between student needs and how scheduling is carried out, school leaders further noted that priorities should shift. One department chair simply stated that “to maximize student success, I think the most tenured teachers should be teaching the toughest classes, and I would define tough as the most classroom management. They may not be the most rigorous, but it's managing the course.” While school leaders like this department chair recognized that experienced teachers were needed in lower-level courses, the centrality of seniority creates a barrier to realizing this outcome. Because more senior teachers have the political capital to shape the master schedule, it often reflects their preferences. As a result, equitable access to experienced teachers depended, in part, on whether those teachers voluntarily selected courses serving higher-need students. One school leader shared: “So as long as I have those strong teachers choosing those low classes, [student equity] is great. But if I don't have that anymore, the students are not going to have a great experience or that equitable experience anymore.”

Strategies for Alleviating Inequities

School leaders shared that honoring teacher preferences was one of the main factors that interfered with doing what was best for students. As highlighted by the previous quote, the teacher assignment process did not center students' needs or address them, rather, the process centered teacher preferences and addressed those desires. Another school leader shared that they saw how these priorities shaped their own course assignments:

I think that there is too much consideration of teacher preference and not enough consideration of what would be the most effective for student learning. So to be honest, I probably shouldn't be teaching AP, I should be teaching the freshman seminar course, or I should be teaching 10th grade.... Because of my ability to manage that class after nine years in education, I feel more effective in getting an understanding... Even though I am an effective AP teacher, my skills would probably be better there. But I hate working with ninth graders and that is part of the reason why I'm not teaching ninth graders. So it's my preference, rather than what I would actually probably be effective at.

With a high level of self-awareness, this school leader notes that their desires, which are respected in the assignment process, likely conflict with what is best for students. This conflict of interest illustrates how teacher-centered assignment processes can disadvantage students. In recognition of such conflicts, many school leaders shared approaches taken to improve the distribution of teacher talent across students, although they varied in the degree to which equity was the intentional goal.

Top-Down Approach

While some school leaders sought to influence teachers' preferences before collecting their input, others with a top-down approach treated the input collected as loose suggestions for their decisions. One department chair stated that while preferences were collected, "it's more of a suggestion of where [teachers] want to teach, they almost have little to no input in where they're going to teach unless their credential prevents them from teaching anything." While teacher preferences are collected, school leaders make the final decision about course assignments. This pattern was emphasized by a department chair who shared:

This year, it was more of an administrative push towards which teachers should teach where, just to make sure that there is a level of equity and a...precedent that the administration was going to oversee who we're teaching...I did the suggestions. But at the same time, the admin kind of filled in who they thought was qualified to teach.

In this case, the school leader explicitly overstepped teacher preferences in an attempt to support an equitable distribution of talent across students and classes. In other cases, school leaders employ a top-down approach to redistribute teacher talent based on teacher fit and credentialing, and to fill gaps in the schedule, rather than with a student-equity-first aim.

Some school leaders deviated from teacher preferences due to logistical limitations. One such limitation that interviewees mentioned was the size of the school. One principal shared:

“We're not a very big school, so there's only one English 9 teacher, there's only one English 10 teacher.” Here, the small school size inherently limited how teachers could be assigned, which was typical not only in small high schools, but also in middle schools due to their tendency to have smaller enrollments. In these smaller schools, the absence of choice meant that there were fewer ways to honor teacher preferences.

Beyond seniority, school leaders also discussed, albeit to a lesser degree, other teacher characteristics that informed their creation of the master schedule. In particular, school leaders considered teachers' fit to their course and student needs based on teacher skills and personality. While all school leaders considered teachers' skills in regard to their content knowledge, this consideration had one consistent outcome: teachers who have a stronger grasp of the material are more likely to be assigned higher-level courses. Alternatively, the consideration of teacher personality had more varied effects. In some cases, the consideration of teacher personality was found to partially disrupt the funneling of senior teachers to advanced courses.

Across schools, lower-level courses were commonly viewed as more challenging assignments. Such courses were often discussed in tandem with working with younger, lower-ability, and more disruptive students which contributed to their perceived difficulty and special consideration when assigning teachers to these classes. Due to the perceived difficulty of lower-level courses, some school leaders noted that they sought out teachers with personality traits seen as beneficial to “handling” a younger age group. One department chair explained that they viewed themselves as someone who could better handle younger students: “[12th grade] would not be my forte, because I don't have that sarcastic, quick wit that you can banter and talk to them. But I banter with my 9th graders in a more playful way, in a more nurturing way.” As

expressed by this department chair, it was often believed that lower-level courses required more nurturing and empathic teachers.

School leaders' beliefs about lower-level courses consequently led to a concerted effort to assign empathetic teachers to those courses. One school leader noted that teachers "that have more empathy towards the students tend to get the lower-level [courses]" due to the associated difficulties. In another case, an assistant principal shared that they move less empathetic teachers who receive more parent complaints to higher-level courses because that is where "the least harm would be done." While these anecdotes do suggest that the funnel of more senior teachers to higher-level courses may be blocked in some cases to optimize matching empathetic teachers to lower-level courses, school leaders noted that more senior teachers still were generally able to avoid teaching more disruptive students, a characteristic often associated with lower-level courses.

Rather than specific to lower-level courses, school leaders often viewed empathetic teachers as a way to support student success in any course where students struggled. In limited cases, this meant that school leaders gave empathetic teachers higher-level course assignments. For example, one department chair shared that they assigned the most student-friendly teacher to a high school senior-level math class where students tended to struggle. This assignment was made because the department chair feared that other less empathetic teachers would fail students and consequently impact graduation. In this case, while student success was often thought of as a byproduct when seniority was prioritized in course assignment decisions, it was the driving force behind school leaders' consideration of teacher personality when they created the master schedule.

High-Low Assignments

Approximately a third of school leaders in the study also reported using a high-low model, in which teachers are assigned a course load that includes both advanced and lower-level courses. These leaders most often attributed this model to pursuing equity, with one leader explaining:

I think that it's equitable... we've gotten to the point where there's like an official policy [in] some departments [where] nobody is going to have all AP, nobody is going to have all the high-achieving kids, nobody's going to have all the low. We're always going to have two preps, a higher level and a lower level. And so we're trying to be really intentional about that process.

The leader explicitly argued that this approach ensured fairness amongst teachers, noting that if all teachers worked with both higher- and lower-achieving students, no teacher had the unfair benefit of teaching all advanced courses or the perceived burden of teaching all lower-level courses. While this model was seen as successful by several school leaders, one participant noted certification limitations that made the high-low model more difficult to implement in certain departments.

Despite the difficulties, school leaders promoted the high-low model as a good solution for uneven teacher satisfaction. Some school leaders also argued that the high-low model had benefits for students, noting that it was beneficial for all teachers to be working with all student populations. However, most of the school leaders framed their school's decision to use a high-low model as a way to promote teacher happiness, rather than as a way to give students in lower-level courses a chance to work with more experienced teachers who are typically assigned advanced courses.

Sorting Students

Due to the dependence of student equity on teacher desires, especially the desires of senior teachers, some school leaders noted that student equity could sometimes only be achieved after the fact rather than as a part of creating the master schedule. After teachers were assigned to their classes, students were then slotted in. At some schools, this was a completely randomized process, but at others, this was a strategic operation where student equity concerns were central. To ensure students have adequate instructors, some school leaders shared practices such as this: “With our special populations of students that are struggling, we typically will schedule their classes first, just to make sure they have teachers that we know will work really well with them.” This practice of hand-scheduling students was commonly discussed as a way to ensure English learners, students experiencing homelessness, and those with individualized education plans were matched to experienced and empathetic teachers. This was seen as a necessary practice because many of these students were commonly placed in lower-level courses where senior teachers were sparsely present. Based on the inequitable distribution of teacher talent that was reinforced by the political capital of seniority, school leaders believed that only by “paying special attention to our students who need it the most, [does course scheduling] become an equitable practice.” By hand-scheduling, school leaders deployed their own organizational capital to remedy the inequities following teachers’ implicit and explicit engagement of their own organizational, social, and informational capital.

Discussion

In this study, we found that the creation of the master schedule is a teacher-centered process that often creates trade-offs with student success and equity. The trade-offs specifically arise due to the prioritization of seniority in the decision-making process. We found that

seniority frequently played an important role in schools' course assignment processes, consistent with prior literature (Grissom et al., 2015; Iannaccone et al., 1991; Lieberman & Clayton, 2018). Most importantly, our study indicates that seniority can be an important form of political capital itself, embodying aspects of organizational, social, and informational capital. As Grissom et al. (2015) found, a teacher's start date dictates their position in the hierarchical school system, giving them more influence over their assignments as time passes. We also found that the more time a teacher spent at a school, the more respect their colleagues had for them. While social capital is typically discussed as the leveraging of friendships in an organization (Grissom et al., 2015), we found that the social capital associated with seniority was more closely connected to the accumulation of respect, which reflected the idea that more senior teachers had earned the right to teach advanced courses. This right was further reinforced by senior teachers' accumulation of knowledge, instructional skills, and certifications, which highlights the unique informational capital of senior teachers in the school setting.

While prior literature has highlighted the power of organizational, social, and informational capital, this study offers the novel insight that school leaders may acknowledge and respect the political capital of teachers without them having to enact it. Through engrained practices that maintain the status quo, school leaders implicitly prioritize seniority in decisions without teachers having to directly enact their political capital. This passive enactment of political capital extends the common application of the theory of micropolitics in schooling, which has previously suggested that school actors must actively wield their capital to enact their preferences (Grissom et al., 2015). Rather, in this study, seniority was found to passively shape the assignment process through institutional norms that privilege more senior teachers' preferences and status quo maintenance. As argued by Sarason (1990), "Schools will

accommodate [change] in ways that require little or no change the strength of the status quo - its underlying axioms, its pattern of power relationships, its sense of tradition and, therefore, what seems right, natural, and proper almost automatically rules out options for change in that status quo” (p. 35). In our interviews, numerous school leaders asserted that, while seniority did not matter in course assignments, it made intuitive sense to just maintain the status quo of course assignments. In this case, teachers did not need to actively invoke their years of experience to enact their preferences. Rather, school leaders shaped course assignments to senior teachers’ liking, simply by keeping things the way they have been.

One potential explanation for this deference to the status quo is a general desire for school leaders to avoid conflict with and between teachers. Prior studies have found that school leaders are largely conflict avoidant (Malen & Cochran, 2008; Marsh, 2012) which was similarly highlighted in this study when one department chair described a new administrator who sought to disrupt the status quo of course assignment backed off once informed that this would foment conflict. Similarly, other school leaders in this study reported knowing that they ought to change the status quo for the good of teachers and students but did not feel it was possible without a pretext for doing so, thereby reinforcing the status quo.

While some school leaders pointed to negative effects of status quo maintenance, many also found it to be an effective strategy to ensure teacher satisfaction and retention. These rationales for status quo maintenance are notably well aligned with some potential benefits to continuity in assignments as highlighted by prior literature. Specifically, researchers have found that there are negative impacts on instructional quality for elementary teachers that switch grades (Blazar, 2015; Ost, 2014; Rogers & Doan, 2019) and for secondary teachers that switch courses and subjects (Cook & Mansfield, 2016). Thus, reassigning teachers to new courses may lead to

suboptimal distributions of teachers, as reassigned teachers are no longer teaching the course they are best at. Additionally, churning teachers into different courses may increase their risk of leaving their position, either to another school or to another profession entirely (Feng, 2010; Ost & Schiman, 2015). Thus, as schools face a shortage of qualified teachers (Sutcher et al., 2016), maintaining the status quo can be an effective approach to retention.

However, given the tie between status quo maintenance and seniority, concerns for student equity were visible in this study. Our findings corroborate prior literature that highlights the fact that many teachers see higher level courses, such as those that are AP and Honors level, as preferable assignments (Grissom et al., 2015; Lieberman & Clayton, 2018) due to a belief that higher ability students are easier to work with and have fewer behavioral issues (Lieberman & Clayton, 2018; Monk, 1987). This trend became evident in our study, as more senior teachers with influence over the master schedule tended to receive these coveted assignments, consistent with the findings of prior studies (Clotfelter et al., 2004; Flores, 2007; Jackson, 2014; Kalogrides et al., 2012). This raises concerns about student equity, as it leaves less-experienced teachers to teach lower-level courses that previous research has found disproportionately include low-income, racially minoritized, and academically struggling students (Goldhaber et al., 2015; Kalogrides et al., 2012; Peske & Haycock, 2006; Rogers & Doan, 2019).

The stratification of experienced teachers by course level within schools is a concerning trend, given the substantial variation in teacher quality within schools (Hanushek et al., 2005; Jeong & Luschei, 2019; Thiemann, 2018). Thus, such variation means that how teachers are sorted can determine the quality of instruction students receive and their subsequent achievement. Prior literature has established that students with higher-quality teachers, as measured by qualifications, classroom management efficacy, pedagogical skills, and value-added

metrics, have higher achievement than their peers (Goe, 2007; Harris & Sass, 2011; Jackson, 2014; Peske & Haycock, 2006; Phillips, 2010). Notably, Phillips (2010) also discovered that students considered at risk for low achievement are especially sensitive to variations in teacher quality. Thus, teacher assignment could be a powerful lever for maximizing student equity by assigning the highest-quality teachers to the student populations in need of the most support. However, our findings indicate that more experienced teachers tend to prefer and secure more advanced course assignments, which suggests that teacher preferences are often in tension with student equity.

In recognition that teachers are often centered in the assignment process at the expense of students, several school leaders in this study discussed ways that they sought to mitigate harm. One practice was that of high-low course assignments where all teachers are given a mix of higher-level and lower-level courses. However, even the high-low approach was often discussed from the standpoint of maximizing equity amongst teachers, rather than amongst students. The goal of the approach was to ensure that no teacher had an unfair schedule and the equitable distribution of talent across student groups was seen as a positive side effect. Given the centrality of teachers in the process, our study found that true consideration of students was often left to be dealt with after assignments were made and during the process of slotting students into classes. However, this process was often limited to specific student groups such as English learners, students experiencing homelessness, and those with individualized education plans due to the amount of effort associated with hand scheduling students. Thus, student equity cannot be fully achieved after the fact and, rather, school leaders should seek ways to incorporate student needs into the process of assigning teachers to their courses.

Conclusion

Course assignments shape the experiences of students and teachers; however, this study demonstrates that the assignment process is dominated by teacher interests. In the political systems of schools, teachers possess sources of capital that are valued by the school leaders who dictate course assignments. The main mechanism through which teachers are centered is school leaders' collection of teacher course preferences, which are typically honored to ensure teacher satisfaction and, in some cases, retention. Though the process of creating the master schedule is not typically centered around student equity considerations, administrators do frequently try to maximize it. This is, however, often constrained by the prioritization of teacher preferences. Generally, this results in a distribution of teacher talent that school leaders feel does not maximize student success, especially for high needs students.

A main deterrent to more equitable course assignment processes for students is teacher seniority. Some school leaders consciously defer to more senior teachers' preferences, while others maintain the status quo of prior assignments—implicitly valuing seniority. The influence of seniority—whether explicit or implicit—on course assignments has a major drawback: teachers tend to prefer higher-level course assignments, often leaving the most high needs students with the least experienced teachers. While school leaders recognized that student characteristics like age, behavior, and ability are important factors that should be considered when assigning teachers, they were not consistently consequential in decision-making and did not ensure equitable distributions of teacher talent for student needs.

Our findings suggest future research should examine how course assignment processes vary across school contexts and identify strategies that promote a more equitable distribution of teacher talent. The micropolitical dynamics described in this study may operate differently

depending on factors such as school size, staffing stability, student demographics, accountability pressures, and organizational structures. Understanding how these contextual factors shape assignment decisions could help explain why some schools are better able to balance teacher preferences with student needs. Future studies should also evaluate strategies designed to reduce inequities in course assignments, including the possible use of formal assignment criteria, collaborative scheduling processes, and equity-focused reviews of master schedules. By identifying the conditions and practices that support more equitable assignment decisions, future research can help school leaders better align course assignment processes with both organizational goals and students' access to high-quality instruction.

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