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Tracking and Detracking: Debates, Evidence, and Best Practices for a Heterogeneous World

Although debate over tracking continues, many schools and districts have attempted various detracking reforms. Detracking efforts vary greatly in method and scope. Assessments of detracking are widely divergent as well, making it difficult to gauge the effectiveness of the reform. Evidence suggests that when implemented well, detracking opens new academic opportunities for students. Additionally, as difference and equity are, arguably, issues in all classrooms, detracking best practices are potentially helpful for teachers and students in tracked and detracked settings. This article provides an overview of (a) the debate over school tracking, (b) various attempts at detracking, and (c) best practices in detracked classrooms and schools, highlighting instructional practices, institutional structures, and belief changes

that best support learning in heterogeneous settings.

TRACKING, THE SORTING AND GROUPING of students for instruction based on an assessment of academic ability, is a long-standing organizational practice of schooling in the United States. Tracking has frequently been critiqued as providing inadequate and inequitable education to students in lower ability tracks, for separating students along race and class lines, and for perpetuating unequal access to a college-bound curriculum. *Detracking*, a reform in which students are placed intentionally in mixed-ability heterogeneous classes, is an attempt to remedy the negative effects of tracking. The debate over the implications of each of these forms of school organization is ongoing, arousing great interest and fervor in educators and noneducators alike.

In this overview, I discuss tracking and the critiques that have been leveled against the practice and describe various forms of detracking that have

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emerged in the past 20 years in response to these critiques. Also, I sort through the numerous studies of detracking in practice to outline promising teaching practices for detracked classrooms and institutional reforms that support detracking, many of which are described more fully in this issue. The most powerful examples of detracking occur in schools where changes in instruction, institutional structures, and beliefs occur simultaneously to support the academic success of all students in newly challenging and stimulating settings.

Research on detracking and heterogeneous grouping has relevance beyond detracked settings. Most classes, even those in which students are grouped by various indicators, are heterogeneous in that they are composed of individuals with varying interests, attitudes, talents, and backgrounds. No matter one's stance amid the political debates over detracking, detracking best practices have broad applicability as they are designed to support student learning in heterogeneous settings.

Tracking and Its Critics

Tracks and ability groups, along with age-level grades, are among the predominant organizing practices of U.S. public schools (Wheelock, 1992). Not all students are in tracked classes for the entire school day, but as students move on through school they usually encounter an increasingly rigid ability-driven structure (Oakes, 1985; Wheelock, 1992). Proponents of tracking argue that ability-driven tracks make it easier for teachers to target instruction appropriately for varying student needs (Hallinan, 1994).

Tracking occurs in a variety of forms within individual schools. It may be overt, with counselors working at times in consultation with students to choose a particular class belonging to a certain track. It may be automatic, with test scores from junior high automatically determining a student's high school track. It may be covert, with grouping done by teacher and counselor recommendation and no sign in the master schedule to indicate that one section of a particular class is any different from another. Students are often aware of ability

grouping even when it is done in a covert manner (Oakes, 1985; Wheelock, 1992).

Many researchers argue that the practice of tracking is inherently unfair and that it plays a crucial role in the creation of inequalities within our society (Goodlad & Oakes, 1988; Mehan, 1992; Meehan et al., 1994; Oakes, 1986, 1992; Slavin, 1991, 1995). Critics argue that tracking serves as a device for sorting students by race and class. Moreover, many researchers claim that students in different tracks do not receive the same quality of education (Oakes, 1985; Page, 1987). These critics hold that curriculum, teaching, and social interactions in the classroom are all affected by tracking, to the detriment of students in the lower track. The consequence, these researchers argue, is a system that is demoralizing and demotivating for the children, usually poor and of color, who end up in the lowest tracks (Murphy & Hallinger, 1989; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992).

Indeed, the correspondence between school tracking and structural inequalities found in the larger society has been well documented. African American, Latino, and low-income children of all ethnicities are overrepresented in low tracks and vocational programs (Oakes, 1992). In integrated schools, tracking often resegregates students by race, and tracking has been legally challenged as amounting to de facto segregation (Welner & Oakes, 1996). Tracking can be seen as a vital part of how schools reproduce inequality, a structural arrangement through which individuals come to accept their own socioeconomic positions as inevitable and natural.

Although curricular tracking was originally developed to provide a more tailored educational experience for the benefit of all students, the negative impact of tracking on students who are grouped low is clear from a variety of empirical studies over several decades. In several studies, Hallinan (Hallinan & Kubitschek, 1999; Sørensen & Hallinan, 1986) found that students assigned to low-ability groups scored lower on standardized tests than if they had been placed in mixed or high-ability groups. Braddock and Dawkins (1993) analyzed National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) data and found that students in lower tracks moved more slowly through the cur-

riculum and did worse in school. Gamoran (1987) found that the achievement gap between low- and high-track students was larger than the gap between students who leave high school without graduating and high school graduates. He also found that low-income students and students of color were disproportionately represented in lower tracks.

Recent research, most notably in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, extends these findings. Wiliam and Bartholomew (2004) concluded that in the United Kingdom, one's track (or *set*) was more consequential for academic progress than the school one attended. Researchers in the Netherlands found that students in homogeneous clusters became more interested in the academic performance of their same-track peers, with a negative effect on low achievers, and students in mixed-ability groupings were less vulnerable to this reference process (Meijnen & Guldmond, 2002).

Other researchers argue that tracking affects all students negatively, regardless of track. Boaler, Wiliam, and Brown (2000) concluded that students in *setted* (tracked) math classes in the United Kingdom experienced a *curriculum polarization* where high-tracked students were forced to move too rapidly through course material and low-tracked students experienced restrictions in their opportunities to learn. This was disadvantageous to both groups, and students in both tracks reported dissatisfaction with their placement. Stearns (2004) concluded, based on her analysis of NELS data, that schools with a high degree of tracking differentiation had a lower degree of *interracial friendliness*. In *Off Track*, a video produced by Fine, Anand, Jordan, and Sherman (1998), students and teachers in a detracked world literature class argue that high-track students lose out on diverse perspectives when they are tracked because tracking segregates students by race and class.

In the late 1980s and 1990s opposition to tracking moved beyond the academic community and, in some places, became policy. During this time period, tracking was formally condemned by the National Governors Association, the Carnegie

Council for Adolescent Development, the College Board, The National Education Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, the California Department of Education, the Massachusetts State Legislature, and others (Welner & Oakes, 1996). This led to a proliferation of detracking reforms, many of which are discussed in the following section.

Implementing Detracking

As noted earlier, in the last 20 years many educational researchers have critiqued tracking and other forms of ability grouping as an inequitable educational practice, unsuccessful at meeting the purported aim of improved academic achievement for all students. This condemnation of tracking has given rise to a variety of attempts at detracking, the dismantling of ability-driven grouping practices. Although there is considerable variation in how it has been carried out, detracking generally entails an attempt to group students heterogeneously as a means of ensuring that all students, regardless of their race or class background or their academic ability, have access to high-quality curriculum, teachers, and material resources. Some of these variations on detracking are explored more fully later in this issue.

Detracking efforts have frequently generated controversy and, in some communities, concerted opposition. Those most likely to oppose these efforts are the parents of children who previously had been placed in the higher tracks, and fear that efforts to promote detracking will result in lowered academic standards. With political and economic resources on their side, such parents have succeeded in blocking detracking efforts in some schools and communities (Oakes, Quartz, Ryan, & Lipton, 2000; Wells & Serna, 1996; Welner, 2001). In other communities, opponents of tracking have squared off with its defenders in drawn-out conflicts that have involved legal challenges, the use of local referendums, and even street protests (Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997).

Despite the controversy, variations of detracking have been implemented in many schools

and, in some cases, entire school districts. Schools and school districts have taken widely divergent approaches to detracking. On one end of the spectrum are deep restructuring efforts, such as the complete elimination of ability grouping in all subject areas throughout an entire school district. On the other end are changes that do not directly affect a school's track structure, such as providing more access to high-track classes for students formerly in lower tracks.

There are a number of large-scale examples of detracking. Grossman and Ancess (2004) described a suburban school district in the Northeast that detracked math from elementary school through the end of high school. Oxley (1994) described the reorganization of several high schools into smaller, detracked subunits. At Southside High School in Rockville Centre, New York, detracking reform began in English and social studies, then continued into science and finally to math classrooms (Garrity, 2004; "Tracking Trounces Test Scores," 2004; Welner & Burris, this issue). In this school, after detracking in all subjects, 71% of low-income students passed the state's Regents exam, and the Regents diploma rate rose to from 58% to 96%. Welner and Burris (this issue) and Alvarez and Mehan (this issue) describe highly successful school-wide detracking efforts.

Other efforts are on a smaller scale. Some are limited to particular subject areas, frequently language arts and social studies in a cored structure; others implement detracking at a specific grade level or one subject at a particular grade level. At some schools, detracking is in the hands of the students, who are allowed to self-select into higher levels if they choose to do so. In other schools, students are chosen to take part in college preparatory courses, and given academic and social support to help them succeed. Such reforms provide a detracked experience or greater access to previously exclusive courses for some students, while maintaining a track structure in the rest of the school. A number of recent studies have found positive results for this sort of detracking and the heterogeneous grouping that it creates (Cooper, 1996; Klingner, Vaughn, & Schumm, 1998; Mehan & Hubbard, 1999;

Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva, 1994; Rothenberg, McDermott, & Martin, 1998).

The broad range of reforms falling under the heading of detracking creates a conundrum for judging its success; it is difficult to make an overarching assessment of a reform that has been implemented in such a wide variety of ways (see Rubin & Noguera, 2004, for a more in-depth summary of research on the effectiveness of detracking). Although researchers claim positive, negative, and mixed effects of detracking on students' school performance, my review of the literature and my work in detracking schools leads me to conclude that the most successful instances of detracking combine deep structural reform with thoughtful pedagogical change, and are undergirded by an engagement with students' and teachers' beliefs around notions of ability and achievement. When these facets converge, the positive results for students are startling.

Detracking Institutions, Instruction, and Beliefs: Best Practices for a Heterogeneous World

A review of the detracking literature reveals a number of best practices that can be of use to educators working in a variety of settings. As previously noted, the most powerful reforms engage on several levels at once: grappling with teacher, student, and community beliefs; reshaping instructional practices; and reforming school structures. This section explores best practices in each of these three areas, noting when they overlap.

Best Practices for Engaging With Beliefs

Underlying belief systems of teachers, students, and communities come into play in detracking schools and classrooms. In a detracked ninth-grade program at a diverse urban school, for example, conflict between teachers' and students' underlying beliefs about difference and the social world of the school interfered with successful detracking (Rubin, 2003b). Indeed, teachers' beliefs about ability appear to deeply affect the enactment

of detracking (Rubin, 2005). Students' beliefs about their own abilities and their emerging identities amid the social world of the school complicate the notion of student choice as a mechanism for detracking (Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002). Community-wide beliefs about race and ability can also inhibit detracking reform (Oakes et al., 1997; Wells & Serna, 1996). Engaging with teacher, student, and community beliefs is a fundamental part of successful detracking work.

Yonezawa and Jones (this issue) focus on students' perspectives on detracking reform, arguing that many students are concerned about inequitable education across tracks and want to see changes in grouping practices, but are concerned that teachers need to be retrained for such changes to be effective. Watanabe (this issue) and Lotan (this issue) pick up where Yonezawa and Jones leave off, describing effective ways to retrain teachers in this vein. Watanabe explores teacher inquiry groups as a means of helping practicing teachers wrestle with the preconceptions about ability and difference that they bring to a newly detracked setting. Such groups, she argues, encourage teachers to examine and challenge underlying beliefs to arrive at more equitable classroom practice. Lotan reaches back further, describing how preservice teachers can be trained in ways that broaden their thinking about the capacities of their students and provide them with concrete guidance for teaching in heterogeneous settings.

In the classroom, the most effective strategies for detracking encourage and incorporate student and teacher redefinitions of underlying beliefs about ability. For example, Herrenkohl (this issue) describes *intellectual role taking*, an instructional practice that encourages students to expand their own views of themselves as learners, helping them to take on roles within the classroom that entail higher order thinking and academic engagement. Cone's (this issue) first-person case study of a detracked ninth-grade English class demonstrates how students' *apprenticeship* into the academic and social discourses of high school English is fundamental to their success in the detracked setting. Other instructional practices in this vein are

described later, and in more detail in the individual articles in this issue.

On a community level, researchers report that underlying discourses of race and ability enter into schools' struggles with detracking, leading many parents with resources to oppose the reform. Welner and Burris (this issue) describe how school leaders and teachers used clear explanations and hard data to convince stakeholders of the value of detracking, despite initial resistance by some members of the community. This strategy shifted underlying beliefs about students' potential and the need for tracking. Belief change and student achievement gains were linked in this instance, indicating their interwoven presence in effective detracking reform.

Instructional Best Practices

Freedman, Delp, and Crawford (2005) noted that effective teaching in detracked classrooms is less about using particular activity systems such as small group work, and more about building from an underlying set of principles. These include: (a) building a learning community that respects and makes productive use of diverse contributions from varied learners; (b) providing opportunities for diverse ways of learning; (c) providing support to individuals as needed; (d) challenging all students; (e) keeping learners actively involved; (f) building a year-long curriculum, which promotes the recycling of structures and ideas, with room for ever deepening levels of complexity; and (g) considering learners to be in control of their learning and building structures that support them in challenging themselves.

The detracking literature is filled with examples of instructional or classroom-based best practices that echo this framework. These include employing curricula and pedagogies with multiple points of entry that are challenging, relevant, and engaging; building a classroom community that includes all learners; and incorporating targeted and effective support for students. As noted previously, many of these practices help students to redefine their own capacities, shifting their sense of

themselves as students so they can take advantage of a newly challenging curriculum.

Curriculum and pedagogy for detracking: Access, interest, challenge, relevance. Many contributors to this issue note that a curriculum that provides multiple entry points and is accessible to students working at a variety of levels is essential for detracking. In math this might take the form of *group-worthy problems* that allow learners to work together on problems that teach fundamental mathematical principles (Boaler, this issue; Horn, this issue). In English this could entail a careful mix of texts and assignments to enfranchise and apprentice all students as readers and writers. Rubin (2005) described a ninth-grade social studies classroom in which the teacher spiraled through a variety of projects with her global studies students—travel journals, maps, research papers, PowerPoint presentations—allowing all of the students in her class to excel at various points, and expanding their range of skills. These are activities that every student in the class can participate in at his or her own level of expertise, showcasing and engaging a multiplicity of skills, talents, and learning styles.

Students in detracked settings appear to benefit from a curriculum that is enticing, open to their interests, and varied in approach. Tomlinson (2003) suggested that a coherent, important, and inviting curriculum is the first step in reaching all learners in a heterogeneous classroom. In his detracked English classroom, for example, Peterson (1998–1999) used a *structured project approach*, in which students created magazine-sized booklets following a prescribed outline. In this class, students also participated in role plays, wrote poetry, and showed their learning in multiple ways. Freedman et al. (2005) described the *multimodal approach* taken in a detracked middle school English classroom, integrating drawing, music, and dance into the curriculum. Related to this is the use of *culturally relevant pedagogy*—building on students' own interests and knowledge, incorporating students' real-life experiences into the curriculum, and using activities that showcase stu-

dents' strengths (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In detracked classrooms, Rubin and Noguera (2004) noticed that when students' knowledge and skills were drawn on, previously quiet and disengaged students became active participants.

A *flexible approach to grouping* often seems to be part of successful detracking efforts. Tomlinson (2001) recommended an approach in which grouping is frequently reconfigured based on content, project, and ongoing evaluation. Peterson (1998–1999) used constantly shifting groups in his English class, based on a variety of aspects, including student interest, reading skills, and background knowledge. In shifting students' reading groups every 2 weeks, with a different novel for each group, he created an element of self-selection by interest. Flexible grouping allows students to get to know all of their classmates, fosters the sense that ability is not fixed and given, and allows the teacher to target instruction more effectively.

Building students' skills of analysis and critique is another detracking best practice. In the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program, lower achieving students of color enrolled in college preparatory courses and in a support class that developed their academic skills and helped them to foster an academic identity. This support class was a place where students developed their critiques of the school's (and of society's) opportunity structure and learned how to participate effectively in that structure (Mehan et al., 1994). Morrell and Collatos (2003) described similar effects in a support program for students of color in a high-ranking California high school. In their description of a heterogeneous small learning community, Keiser and Stein (2003) explored how teaching students the skills of critique and democratic participation empowered students of color in this integrated setting. In this issue, Cone, Boaler, Horn, Herrenkohl, and Hyland all describe innovative pedagogies to build students' analytical capacities that are specific to particular content areas. Such strategies play the dual role of cultivating higher order thinking skills and making the curriculum more dynamic, interesting, and meaningful for students.

Community building for detracking. Many detracking researchers note that curriculum and pedagogy do not take place in a vacuum. Detracking must be accompanied by a community-building effort that makes the heterogeneous classroom a safe and supportive place for all students. Such efforts frequently overlap with curricular and pedagogical best practices, as in the mathematics classrooms of Railside High School, where the curriculum necessitated students' mutual academic support of one another, resulting in a deepened sense of community across differences (Boaler, this issue). Cone (this issue) established mutual respect and a community feel through the sharing of autobiographical statements at the beginning of the school year and the incorporation of reading groups into her curriculum. Freedman et al. (2005) described how a teacher began the year with a consideration and adoption of a common moral and ethical code based on the values of *dignity, respect, and integrity*. These values became a community reference point and part of the actual curriculum, integrated into the students' study of literature. Addressing the social and community dimensions of detracking is essential for avoiding the refragmentation of the class into within-class tracks based on ethnicity or perceived ability that can impede the academic progress of students in detracked settings.

Academic support for detracking. The success of detracking efforts, particularly for students who were previously tracked low, hinges on students' access to meaningful academic support. Such support must be built into the detracked classroom itself, as well as into the structure of the school day (as described in the next section). Within the detracked classroom itself, several specific scaffolding strategies have proven successful. Klingner, Vaughn, and Schumm (1998) found that teaching students reading comprehension strategies and having them apply these strategies to social studies textbooks in heterogeneous student-led groups resulted in an improvement in performance on assessments. Horton and Lovitt (1989) found that study guides helped students in

heterogeneously grouped classes of students with and without learning disabilities.

The structure of the curriculum itself can provide support for students. Freedman et al. (2005) and Horn (this issue) describe curricula in English and math that *recycle* or *loop* key ideas to provide students with multiple opportunities to learn important concepts at varying levels of complexity. Providing individualized support for students within the context of the detracked classroom through such activities as reading journals and targeted assignments appears effective as well. Institutional support for students is described next.

Institutional Best Practices

Reforming institutional structures to better meet student needs is critical to the success of detracking efforts. Institutional reforms include the creation of supplemental support classes to assist students who are struggling in one or more subject areas, meaningful support for teachers striving to implement detracking reform, and whole-school and district changes that create deeper roots for classroom-level detracking reform.

The level of academic work in the detracked classroom can present a challenge to students who are less adept at various tasks than their peers. Support classes, sometimes referred to as *backup classes*, can provide the essential bridge between struggling students and the new opportunities available to them in detracked settings. Such classes should be designed to help students catch up on skills and concepts they may have missed along the way, and to support them in completing their daily work in the detracked class. At a predominantly affluent suburban high school, students enrolled in a structured support class were better able to meet the challenges of their detracked English and social studies classes than students without such support. These students approached their detracked classes with greater confidence because they knew they would receive time and assistance to complete reading and writing assignments in another setting (Rubin, 2003a). Similar findings have been generated from research on programs aimed at bringing low-income

students of color, formerly tracked low, into honors and advanced placement courses by providing them with complementary support (Mehan, Hubbard, Villanueva, & Lintz, 1996). At Southside High School, students are enrolled in small support classes in English, mathematics, and science, taught by subject area teachers.

Teachers need time and resources to accomplish the sorts of instructional and belief changes described in previous sections. In the Rockville Centre school district, teachers were paid stipends to design new curriculum, were given common planning time by department, and time to work with students was built into the contract (American Youth Policy Forum, 2003). At another school, detracking was supported by district-wide professional development on differentiated instruction. At schools where detracking was not accompanied by time and resources for professional development and instructional retooling, teachers floundered, frequently reverting to practices common in tracked settings (Rubin & Noguera, 2004).

Departmental, school, and district-wide reforms embody a more holistic approach, creating a hospitable context for detracking classrooms and the students and teachers within them. Horn (this issue) describes how two different schools supported a full detracking effort in mathematics (often considered the most difficult subject to detrack) through a raft of changes. These included changes in teachers' views of the subject to focus on connections and meaning, curricular reforms to center courses on the study of important mathematical ideas, and incorporation of new pedagogies to broaden students' notions of what it meant to be good at math. This department-wide approach ensured that difficult but necessary changes were made in all mathematics classrooms, providing a solid framework for the schools' ambitious detracking efforts.

School and district-wide reforms provide an even deeper foundation for detracking. Alvarez and Mehan (this issue) describe the efforts of the Preuss School on the University of California, San Diego campus, a school dedicated to preparing all 700 of its low-income students to be eligible to attend college. At this school, a broad range of social and academic supports create a challenging

and encouraging environment that produces success in a detracked context for previously underserved students. District-wide reforms are particularly useful in helping to get at the root causes of students' low performance in certain areas. In Rockville Centre, troubled by students' difficulties in high-level mathematics and science courses, district administrators decided to begin the implementation of heterogeneous grouping earlier in these areas to increase students' success in later grades (Welner & Burris, this issue). The district eliminated tracking in math beginning in sixth grade and phased out the gifted and talented program that began in fourth grade, integrating a district-wide enrichment program for all students. As they dismantled middle school tracking they required accelerated math for all students and a lab science for all eighth graders.

Such changes go far beyond the elimination of tracks for a single course or grade level; they address the multiple causes of the academic achievement gap and provide teachers the time and assistance they need to revolutionize their approach to the classroom. As Rubin and Noguera (2004) wrote:

Although detracking itself may seem like a substantial alteration of the usual manner of business in our public schools, even deeper changes in school structure and distribution of institutional resources may be necessary for the reform to reach its intended goals of increasing equity and access for previously underserved students. For detracking to truly serve those whom it was intended to benefit, schools may need to put more resources into measures that support these students. This may include ensuring that detracked classes are smaller and therefore able to provide more personalized support for students. It is also helpful to add classes and programs designed to accelerate the skills development of students who were previously tracked low. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, teachers who will be required to teach detracked classes must be provided substantial support and training on how to teach such classes. They may also need the opportunity to meet regularly as a group, to observe each other teach, and to share and analyze student work so that they can support each other in meeting the academic goals of this reform. (p. 98)

Institutional reforms are the backbone of successful detracking, providing a broader context for classroom-level changes and setting the stage for the shifts in student, teacher, and community beliefs that are essential to any flourishing detracking effort.

Conclusion

Whether or not detracking itself becomes a prevalent practice, issues of equity and difference will remain central to the concerns of educators. Heterogeneity is the norm rather than the exception in school classrooms. All classrooms are heterogeneous, made up of individuals with varying interests, attitudes, talents, and backgrounds. Furthermore, as the inclusion of special education students and English language learners becomes prevalent in tracked and detracked settings, the issue of heterogeneity is at the forefront of teachers' concerns more than ever. The best practices drawn from research in detracked settings can be of use to all concerned educators. Detracking, when carefully implemented, involves a set of intuitional, instructional, and belief changes that provide outstanding educational opportunities for all students.

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