

Choosing Tracks: “Freedom of Choice” in Detracking Schools

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In this article, we discuss how and why educators’ attempts at detracking by providing students and parents with greater “freedom of choice” in track placement often result in little movement of low- and middle-track students into high-track classes. Using data from six racially mixed high schools undergoing detracking reform, the authors contend that these schools’ low- and middle-track students, most of whom were African American and Latino, resisted entering high-track classes because the relationship between their places in the tracking hierarchy and their evolving identities and ideologies shaped the way such options were presented to and perceived by them. The authors conclude that the hidden institutional barriers within schools, the students’ tracked aspirations, and the desire of students to learn in “places of respect” thwarted reformers’ efforts to detrack through the mechanism of choice.

KEYWORDS: *detracking, race, school choice, school reform, tracking.*

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Within racially and socioeconomically diverse schools, the practice of tracking or ability grouping¹—grouping students in differentiated programs or courses based on perceived ability—often results in racially and socioeconomically segregated classrooms (Oakes, 1985; Dornbusch, 1994). Often, low-income, Black, and Latino students sit in basic or remedial courses, while mid-to-high-income White and Asian students enroll in separate and unequal honors courses (Gamoran, 1992; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992).

In the early 1990s, educators nationwide embarked on ambitious “detracking” reforms, seeking alternatives to tracking and ability grouping. Support for these efforts came from state educational agencies, including Massachusetts, Kentucky, Texas, and Alabama, and nonprofit organizations such as the Children’s Defense Fund, the College Board, and the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund. Policymakers, both liberal and conservative, also endorsed detracking as befitting the push for higher standards (Wells & Oakes, 1996). Despite widespread support, educators and policymakers attempting detracking found track structures extremely difficult to dismantle for various social, political, and cultural reasons (Oakes, Wells, & Associates, 1997; Wells & Serna, 1996).

Our research team² conducted a three-year, longitudinal case study of 10 racially and socioeconomically mixed secondary schools (six high schools and four middle schools) voluntarily engaged in detracking. Data collection for the larger study occurred from fall 1992 to spring 1995. At each school we sought to understand the process of change and to document the efforts of educators who struggled pedagogically and politically to dismantle their schools’ tracking systems. We also attempted to capture students’ and parents’ efforts to understand and negotiate their schools’ reform efforts.

In all of the schools that we studied “freedom of choice” in course placement, a mechanism that educators used to create more heterogeneous³ or mixed “ability” classes, was popular but unsuccessful. Choice was popular among educators because it targeted the processes of ability grouping rather than the structures or cultures that support it. That is, it placed the onus of the reform on students to take high-track courses rather than on educators to dismantle track structures and address cultural norms—e.g., the conflation of race, class, and intelligence—that support ability grouping.

In this article we explore the reasons why choice failed as a detracking mechanism to create heterogeneous classes in the schools we studied. We show that offering choice without altering prevailing track hierarchies was unsuccessful because tracking is supported by a complex interdependence of structures and reinforcing cultural assumptions that students vary in ability, which, in turn, influences students’ identities and actions. Choice eliminated the technical barriers in tracking *processes* for low-track students by allowing them to enroll in higher-track classes if they so chose. Yet it failed because it also continued the *structural and cultural* facets of low-, middle-, and high-track classes. It failed because it left intact the schools’ tracked structures, or the spaces that students occupied, and the identities and social relations that students formed in response to track placements.

Tracks as Political Spaces

Fundamental to our analysis of choice as a detracking mechanism is a reconceptualization of tracks as political spaces, places where people fashion their identity and social relations. We see tracked classes as more than physical places where students sit in separate rooms. Tracks are politically and socially significant spaces because we assign meaning to them, and thus they create and are created by the identities of the people within them (Haymes, 1995; Keith & Pile, 1993; Rury, 1997).

Social theorists who study the reflexive relationship of political, economic, and cultural forces in urban centers expose relationships among power, place, and identity within academic tracks (Gottdiener, 1985; Massey & Denton, 1993; Haymes, 1995). These theorists assert that the racial and economic isolation of urban centers, and thus of urban schools, are not natural. They result from the social and political construction of cities as spatially organized arenas of urban life (Gottdiener, 1985; Rury, 1997; Anyon, 1997). Black, Latino, and low-income urban centers are created through the complex interplay of reduced opportunities, political strategizing by power elites, and cultural mythologies of non-White spaces as disordered and dangerous. We believe that low-track classes in many racially mixed schools are sustained in a similar manner.

The segregated nature of tracked spaces shapes the relationships and identities of students, parents, and educators by limiting their supportive and informative relationships with diverse groups (Hallinan & Williams, 1989; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Yonezawa, 1997). Cultural forces buttressed by tracking legitimize society's construction of "merit" and "ability" to value the experiences of some students over others (Oakes, Wells, Datnow, & Jones, 1997). This explains why low-track classrooms are often filled with low-income, Black, and Latino students whose understanding of the world is often not rewarded in schools.

To show the limits of choice as a detracking tool, we examine the multiple and interdependent reasons that choice failed to create heterogeneous classes at these six schools. We do this by using low- and middle-track students' explanations of why they refused higher placements. We organize our findings around three themes: *institutional barriers*, *tracked aspirations*, and *choosing respect*. We discuss the themes separately; however, interactively, they reveal that choice fails because of the interaction among tracking's structures and cultures and students' identities, social relations, and actions.

Our first theme, *institutional barriers*, coheres with information network research to show that the places that students and parents occupied in the larger social structure often shaped the information they received about course placement (Granovetter, 1973; 1983; Huckfeldt, 1983). The home and school positions of students, parents, and educators merged with schools' efforts at dissemination of information about choice-based policies in ways that ensured that some students knew their options and others did not. Schools acted in selectively flexible ways and, at times, blocked students' requests with hidden prerequisites.

The second theme, *tracked aspirations*, documents how students' aspirations and identities, influenced by their past educational experiences, predisposed them either to exercise or to overlook their schools' choice policies. Using research on aspirations and identity (Fordham, 1996; MacLeod, 1987; Willis, 1977), we describe how detracking choice policies reinforced identities of low-track students who doubted their ability to compete in high-track classes and of high-track students who saw themselves as entitled. We extend research on how the spaces that students occupy in tracking structures help to configure their aspirations and identity formation (Gottdiener, 1985; Rury, 1997).

Perhaps most significant, our third theme, *choosing respect*, shows that some resistant low- or middle-track students bypassed more challenging classes because they hungered for "places of respect"—classrooms where they were not racially isolated and their cultural backgrounds were valued. Hill-Collins (1991) and hooks (1990) argue that oppressed people often seek out "safe spaces" and "homeplaces," sites where they feel secure and liberated. We, too, found that in the schools in our study some low-track classes and ethnic studies courses were seen by students as places where they could restore "the dignity denied [them] on the outside in the public world" (hooks, 1990, p. 42). Our finding thus challenges current conceptions of low-track classes as fundamentally oppressive places. Yet we do not advocate maintaining high- and low-tracked classes; rather, we critique policies that aim to move students out of low-track classes and into high-track ones, *without altering prevailing hierarchies in schools*.

Tracking, Ability Grouping, and Detracking: Unpacking the Concepts and Reforms

Recent reports suggest that tracking, as it has often been described, is no longer widely practiced by American schools (Lucas, 1999). Historically, *tracking* is the grouping of students by presumed ability or achievement into a *series of courses* with differentiated curriculums (Braddock & Dawkins, 1993; Gamoran, & Mare, 1989; Oakes, 1985). Under such policies students took *all* high- or *all* low-level classes, labeled academic, general, or vocational, and rarely moved between them. Ample evidence showed that tracking had deleterious effects on the education and future of students, particularly Black, Latino, and low-income students (Dornbusch, 1994; Oakes, 1985; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page 1991).

Because of research critical of tracking, many schools today have shifted to *ability grouping*—course-by-course placement of students as determined by perceived ability and prerequisites (Lucas, 1999). Recent research shows that students today often take a range of courses across formerly tracked programs (e.g., academic or general). For example, a student might take honors English and regular math simultaneously. Yet, despite the fact that students are no longer as limited in movement, research also shows that today's course structures are often stratified in ways that mask the continued existence of high-level and low-level courses (e.g., pre-Algebra, Algebra Explorations, Algebra

A and B, and Algebra) (Lucas, 1999). Therefore, although old-fashioned tracking has declined, many researchers, including us, are reluctant to relinquish the term “tracking” because ability grouping can become defacto tracking by continuing to support racial, ethnic, and social-class segregation within schools, with low-income students and students of color generally remaining in the lowest levels (Lucas, 1999; Oakes, Wells, & Associates, 1996; Wheelock, 1992).

In line with this thinking, *detracking* is defined by many scholars and practitioners as the process of replacing tracked course programs or so-called ability-grouped classrooms with “mixed-ability” classrooms, also termed “heterogeneous” (Wheelock, 1992). Research conducted on schools attempting detracking has found that doing so is politically difficult and that aspects of tracking often persist despite bold efforts by change agents (Oakes et al., 1997; Wells & Serna, 1996). This is partly because detracking requires educators, parents, and students to rethink traditional, ubiquitous conceptions of intelligence and merit, as related to race and class (Oakes et al., 1996; Oakes et al., 1997).

Some reports suggest, however, that schools attempting to detrack become more attentive to equalizing access to curriculum for all students, maintain higher expectations for previously low-track students, and improve the quality of student work in their classrooms (Oakes, et al., 1997; Wheelock, 1992). Teachers benefit by becoming more reflective of their practice and raising their professional efficacy (Cone, 1990; Ross, McKeiver, & Hogaboam-Gray, 1997).

Although advocates see detracking as the creation of heterogeneous classes, our research group found that the reform manifests differently in various contexts. In some schools, detracking means eliminating remedial tracks and providing tutoring or “double dose” programs to help students struggling in higher courses. In others, detracking is flexible regrouping: Students are grouped by ability in a subject area but are reassessed and regrouped numerous times a year to prevent stagnation and isolation (Wheelock, 1992; Oakes et al., 1996). Local variation occurs partly because the forces that buttress tracking are often parochial and must be addressed in ways befitting each school community’s unique context (Wells & Serna, 1996). The schools we studied were engaged in ability grouping rather than traditional tracking; educators maintained hierarchical course structures in subject areas and worked with students to select courses.

Yet, although the schools we studied engaged in course-by-course ability grouping rather than strict tracking per se, some educators at these sites remained troubled by the racial and socioeconomic homogeneity of students within specific course levels (e.g., honors or remedial). This concern caused some to define detracking as eliminating prerequisites for higher-level courses and encouraging previously “low-ability” students to choose more challenging classes. Educators believed that this choice-based approach would create more racially and socioeconomically heterogeneous classes and avoid the political upheaval that would accompany eliminating course hierarchies. This article is the first to discuss choice as an often-used yet unsuccessful detracking strategy. It is also one of the first to include students’ perceptions about what these choices meant to them.

The Influence of Political Spaces on Educational Choice

When we analyze choice as a detracking mechanism while reconceptualizing tracks as political spaces of identity formation, we show that formerly low- and middle-tracked students, when faced with the choice of advanced courses, struggle with more than rigorous curricula and stiff competition. They also struggle to redefine themselves in relation to their new positions in a track structure that remains largely intact.

Our analysis of detracking-by-choice resembles analyses conducted on other educational choice policies, such as “freedom of choice” desegregation plans in Southern school districts following the Brown decision. This research found that few Black students “chose” to leave their neighborhood schools to enroll in White schools (Wells, 1993a) because of weak support by some White educators and parents and because of the Black students’ understandable hesitancy to leave schools and communities where they felt comfortable for much more hostile places (Wells, 1993a).

More recent school choice research shows that socioeconomic status and race greatly influence how students and parents choose between schools and their willingness to exercise the choices offered them (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1992; Fuller, Elmore, & Orfield, 1996; Wells & Crain, 1998; Wells, 1993b; Witte, 1993; Lee, Bryk, & Smith, 1993). Specifically, low-income students are often more reluctant to exercise school choice than are middle-income students, although the extent of the disparity depends on the policy enacted (Ball & Gewirtz, 1996; David et al. 1996; McKinney, 1997).

In the literature on tracking, arguments have been made, by Loveless (1999) in particular, that low-track students choose low-track classes because they think they are easier and because they believe those are the classes in which they can achieve academically. Although this explanation is appealing, the data from our study show that it is simplistic. More complicated cultural and political issues intertwined with issues of race and class inhibit the movement of poor and minority students into higher-track classes.

Methods

Choice was used as a mechanism for detracking at all ten schools in our study (four middle schools and six high schools). By choice we mean that educators opened student access to high-track courses or programs by reducing course prerequisites or recommendation requirements. At the four middle schools, choice was defined as increasing student access to gifted programs and honors math or English classes. At the six high schools, choice meant granting students options to take higher courses by eliminating or reducing course prerequisites. In this article we focus on the use of choice as a detracking mechanism at the six high schools, because the options presented to high school students were more extensive than those presented to middle school students.

Choice manifested itself differently from site to site. Some high schools allowed students to choose honors courses within a few academic depart-

Table 1
Detracking by Choice in Six Racially Mixed Senior High Schools

High school	Region/ type of community	Student population	Major components of detracking	Use of choice in detracking
Central	West Coast suburban	2,200 students 62% Latino 23% White 7% African American 8% Asian/Filipino 45% LEP ^a	Integrated science is offered to all freshmen. All students take English 1 in either 9th or 10th grade. Basic-level math classes were eliminated; students take either interactive or traditional math sequences. Both sequences fulfill college entrance requirements.	School policy allows otherwise low- or middle-track students to choose high-track courses in English and social studies. Students also choose between integrated and traditional math and science pathways.
Grant	Northwest urban	1,300 students 50% White 36% African American 9.5% Asian 4.5% other	Prerequisites to enroll in honors English in 9th, 10th, and 11th grades were eliminated. Some teachers offer the same curriculum in honors and regular classes. No prerequisites for science classes.	Students are allowed to choose honors English at each grade level. They are also allowed to enroll in higher-level science courses at will. The district's "requirements" of two years of physical education and three years of vocational education can be waived.
Green Valley	West Coast urban	2,000 students 50% White 50% Latino	9th- and 10th-grade English classes are heterogeneous. Backup classes are mandated for low-achieving students, and there are tutorial periods. Science and math retain traditional sequencing.	All students can request higher-level courses in any subject if they feel they can handle it. Counselors can refuse placements but are encouraged by the administration to allow students "the right to fail."

(Continued)

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Detracking by Choice in Six Racially Mixed Senior High Schools

High school	Region/ type of community	Student population	Major components of detracking	Use of choice in detracking
Liberty	West Coast urban	2,500 students 41% White 38% African American 10% Latino 10% Asian 1% other	All students take a heterogeneous 9th-grade English and history core class. Backup classes are mandated for low-achieving students. The school offers interactive and traditional math sequences. Both fulfill college requirements.	In the 9th and 10th grades, all students are enrolled heterogeneously. In the 11th and 12th grades, students are encouraged by counselors to strive for higher course placements. Freshmen also choose between the interactive and traditional math sequence.
Plainview	Midwest suburban	1,450 students 75% White 25% African American	The 9th-grade social studies and academic lab classes, which address transition issues, are heterogeneous. The 9th-grade remedial courses in English, math, and science were eliminated. Ninth-grade science is heterogeneous.	An explicit and often-stated school policy allows any and all students to choose AP and honors courses. School officials work at increasing the number and type of AP courses offered to give students a wide array of top-tier courses to select from.
Union	Southeast urban	1,400 students 68% White 28% African American 4% other	There are two tracks, regular and advanced, for English, social studies, and science. English and social studies are taught in two-period interdisciplinary learning teams. Low-level math classes were eliminated, but multiple layers (several versions of algebra) continue.	Students can petition for placement in the advanced track if they do not meet the criteria for automatic admission. In most cases, those requests are granted, even if teachers and counselors recommend against it, as long as students and parents sign contracts assuming responsibility.

^a LEP = Limited English Proficient.

ments, whereas others allowed students to self-select courses across the curriculum. All of schools assumed that low-track students would choose higher-track courses. We do not have quantitative data on the exact numbers of low-tracked students who moved into higher track classes,⁴ but our interviews captured educators' surprise at how few students did so. Interviews with students also told us that they were reluctant to make such moves. Furthermore, systematic observations showed that classrooms remained segregated by race and class, with low-income and minority students in the lowest levels.

The salience of choice as a detracking tool at the six high schools was particularly significant given the contextual diversity of the schools in our sample. The sites varied by size, geography, urbanization, and racial and socioeconomic composition (see Table 1).

Yet, regardless of local context, the notion of choice as a useful detracking mechanism held across the sites. Whether the schools were urban or rural, enrolled a majority of African Americans, Caucasians, or Latinos, or served the children of farm workers or of university professors, choice was an important part of their detracking strategy. Thus we devote less time to local descriptions of each school and focus on why choice as a detracking mechanism did not result in less stratified and less segregated course offerings.

Our Sample

All ten of the schools we studied were chosen for their national geographic position, their diversity (the racial and socioeconomic diversity of their student bodies), and their commitment to detracking. The ten schools were chosen from a group of 200 schools, all of which responded to an advertisement for a research study examining schools voluntarily engaged in detracking. The schools ranged in student populations from over 3,000 to less than 500. They enrolled different mixes of Latino, White, African American, Asian American, and Pacific Islander students, and all ten had socioeconomically mixed student populations.

Two to four members of our research team conducted three data collection trips to each school over a two-year period. We conducted a total of 423 semistructured interviews with administrators, teachers, counselors, local and state-level policymakers, parents, students, and community members. Interviewees were identified through a combination of predetermined lists (e.g., all principals and academic department chairs were interviewed). The interviews collected were taped and transcribed verbatim.

We supplemented our interviews with about 75 classroom observations, during which we concentrated mainly on academic subjects (e.g., math, science, English, and social studies), although we sometimes sat in on vocational education classes as well. We also observed faculty, parent, and community meetings as well as neighborhood governance meetings, including those of local school boards. The classroom and meeting observations were recorded as semistructured field notes. Additionally, more than 100 documents from the school sites and local communities were collected. All of the interview, observation, and document data were coded and analyzed. Comprehensive,

single-case-study reports were compiled on each school and were used for cross-case analysis.

Next, we used the comprehensive, site-based case studies to discern cross-case themes. If a theme was identified in the data—e.g., choosing respect—we returned to the larger data set to conduct further analyses on the depth of the theme’s presence and to look for contradictory evidence. Excerpts from the transcripts and the observation notes were organized around larger themes. Then subthemes were identified and checked for their representation in the larger data set. Finally, illustrative quotations were extracted from the data for the article (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). As with all qualitative research, we had to make difficult choices about the quotations we chose to analyze, those we included in this article, and those we omitted (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Merriam, 1998). In choosing quotations, we followed the advice of Erickson (1986) to share illustrative data that reflected the general pool of responses. Because the themes and findings that emerged were so robust, many other similar quotations could have been used in this article to render the same conclusions. We regret that not all of the voices of the students could be included.

Results

In the following sections we discuss the three themes—institutional barriers, tracked aspirations, and choosing respect. Although the themes are distinct, they overlap and intertwine. How institutions enacted their choice-based policies and how students made sense of the policies in light of their academic and social histories are important aspects of the explanation for the failure of choice-based detracking policies in the effort to promote greater equity within schools.

Theme 1: Institutional Barriers

Despite stated policies and the supposed freedoms granted to students, many students in the schools we studied encountered several types of institutional barriers to course choice. Information was distributed unevenly from educators to students; educators responded selectively to students’ requests for higher placements; and students encountered hidden prerequisites when exercising their “options.”

Uneven Information

For the past two decades, sociologists have examined how racial and class-based segregation in people’s workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods shape the relationships or networks that they form and the information that they accrue (Granovetter, 1973, 1983; Huckfeldt, 1983; Lin, 1990; Weatherford, 1982). Past tracking practices affect the form and content of networks that students form with their peers and educators (Hallinan & Sorenson, 1985; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Despite the lessening of this social impact of tracking as students’ course-taking patterns grew more

flexible (Lucas, 1999), the relative positions that the students we studied held in their communities and schools continued to shape the course information they received (and did not receive).

For example, educators at Midwestern Plainview High School relied heavily on neighborhood networks to inform students of the open access policy for advanced placement (AP). Informed Plainview students found out about the policies at home from “their brothers or sisters” or “through the neighborhood.” This system of local networks worked well for students who lived in the White areas of the district. But it failed the school’s Black students, who either lived in an isolated Black community in the district or lived miles away in the city and attended the school through a desegregation plan. Formal efforts by Plainview High’s counselors to advertise their open-access policy didn’t help. For example, the counseling department held parent “coffees” to convey information about students’ course options and their implications. Yet few African-American parents—the ones who needed the information the most—attended the coffee we observed.

At West Coast Central High, where a majority of the students are low-income and Latino, most educators rarely informed students that they could petition for honors classes. One Central teacher commented, “There is supposed to be a process to get into honors classes. . . . But we’ve been kind of lax on that.” Similarly, at Union High School, a school serving low-income Black and White students in a mid-sized southeastern city, educators relied on word of mouth to acquaint students with the school’s honors petition. Thus few students knew about the petitions, which were held by just one counselor.

At Grant High School, in a large northwestern city, White and wealthy students took advantage of the school’s waiver policy to avoid physical education and vocational education classes and enroll in advanced math and science courses. Information about Grant’s waiver policy rarely reached the school’s Black students, who generally took all of the district’s “required” two years of physical education and three years of vocational education.

The degree to which educators worried about distributing information evenly was connected, in part, to the sociopolitical positions of their students. Grant’s waiver policies were well known to students who educators assumed would use them to advance their own education. Plainview counselors held parent coffees because White parents demanded accurate and timely academic information and because counselors believed that college-bound students needed such information for entry into top-tier universities. At Central and Union, however, educators did not see information about honors as critical for their students, as children of farm workers or military personnel.

Selective Flexibility

Past research on tracking shows that schools often selectively alter their course offerings to match the racial and socioeconomic characteristics of their students (Garet & DeLany, 1988; Oakes & Guiton, 1995). Structural aspects of schools such as staff capability and resources influence such decisions. Educators’

cultural norms and expectations about the abilities of their student population (signaled by race, ethnicity, and social class) also sway decisions about course creation and placement, however.

In the schools that we studied, the schools as institutions and the educators as individuals engaged in selective flexibility. By selective flexibility, we mean that educators readily acquiesced to course-placement requests of White, Asian, and upper-income, high-track, high-achieving students. Meanwhile, low-track, low-achieving students, many of whom were Latino, African American, and low-income, bumped up against resistance.

This phenomenon of selective flexibility, while apparent to some degree in all six high schools, appeared strongest in the low-status schools—those with the greatest number of low-income, African-American, and Latino students and the fewest White and wealthy students. At these schools, high-status students were considered a scarce resource and consequently enjoyed latitude when requesting course placements.

At Central High School, for example, where only 10–12% of its 60% Latino student body attend four-year colleges and where high-status students were rare, teachers accommodated requests made by Whiter, affluent honors students. For instance, one Central teacher said she willingly taught an extra, early morning period of honors French to accommodate some high-track students whose schedules conflicted with the period already offered. She altered her personal and professional schedule to meet their needs.

They are my prize kids. They're my kids that take the honors, the honors history, the honors math, and honors is the highest. . . . They take honors everything. And they couldn't fit the extra French in, so they asked me to take them zero period. That's how bright they are. . . . They don't take cooking and sewing and that kind of thing. Their elective is French. I don't want to lose those kids and I can't tell them no. . . . How could I tell a kid you're so bright, you're motivated, and I can't be flexible enough to help you? I mean, that's insane.

Meanwhile, low-income, low-track Central students' experience with "choice" was different. These students, many of whom were Latino, told us how counselors and teachers denied or delayed their requests to move into higher-level courses. One recalled how he repeatedly approached his counselor to enroll in an advanced math course but could never get an appointment and, consequently, never transferred out of the lowest math. Another low-track Central student said, "It seems like they put you in a class where they feel it's right. They don't listen to your opinion on what classes you want to be in."

High-track students sometimes met with resistance from educators as well, but only when they requested lower placements. For instance, at Union High School, honors students opting for lower placements had to have proof that their parents approved the move. Similarly, at Central High, a counselor stated that she did not allow high-track students to drop track levels if she believed they belonged in those classes.

I've argued with them too, I can be real mean. If a student comes in to me and says, "That class is too hard, I want to move down to U.S. History II instead of U.S. History III," I won't let him do that. If they're in a college-prep English class and they just want an easier history class or whatever, I say, "No." Because they talk to their friends. . . . "This teacher doesn't require as much work, his tests are easier," da, da, da, whatever. And I won't do it, and they walk out mad. And that's okay! I don't mind.

Hidden Prerequisites

Low- and middle-track students also confronted hidden prerequisites when exercising course "choice." The prerequisites varied from site to site, but the effects were the same—students were thwarted from choosing advanced courses.

At highly stratified Plainview High, where maintaining a separate elite track is seen by administrators as the best way to stem White flight, choosing to be in honors classes was never as easy as educators reported (Wells & Serna, 1996). The school had an open-door policy for honors; however, many students found that they needed another course or a higher grade before they could advance. For instance, an honors math teacher at Plainview insisted that all students were welcome in her class, *if* they had successfully completed prerequisites that began in junior high:

- Teacher:* It's an open class, anybody can be in it. We don't exclude anybody. Anybody who wants to try it, no matter what, they're allowed to do it.
- Interviewer:* Even if they haven't had . . .
- Teacher:* Well, they have to have had Algebra I and Geometry.
- Interviewer:* Algebra I and Geometry, okay. So beyond that, . . .
- Teacher:* And so, beyond that, it's strictly. . . . I mean, we could recommend that we don't think their skill level is appropriate.

At rural Green Valley High, where many students are not proficient in English, the assistant for counseling noted that all juniors and seniors were welcome in AP English. But, before they signed up, they had to go through the English department's screening process to ensure they "know what they're getting into." Although access was technically open, students who wanted honors had to jump through hoops: "It is open access, but, you know, there *is* a screening process," said the assistant principal.

Central High counselors operated as gatekeepers creating their own hidden hurdles for students wishing to move up. For example, one counselor at Central described how she administered a mini-reading comprehension test to students with low standardized test scores before she allowed them into more advanced courses:

- Counselor:* I have them read to me when the scores don't make sense.
- Interviewer:* Read?
- Counselor:* I have a little card that I have them read and over time, it's kind of interesting. . . .

- Interviewer:* Like a little comprehension test. . . ?
Counselor: Yeah, it's very superficial. But the kids that can't read it or tell me what it means obviously don't belong in college-prep classes.

Such hidden prerequisites prevented many low- and middle-track students from making the most of the new choices they purportedly had available to them.

Theme 2: Tracked Aspirations

The heights to which students aspire can play a powerful role in deciding what options students do and do not choose to exercise. Yet the factors that shape students' aspirations are multifaceted, including race (Ogbu, 1978; MacLeod, 1987; Hauser & Anderson, 1991), gender (Crowley & Shapiro, 1982; Marini, 1984), parental influence (Stage & Hossler, 1988), peer groups (Hallinan & Williams, 1989), and school structures and cultures (Fine, 1991; Lightfoot, 1983; Metz, 1978; Willis, 1977).

Academic tracks are important structural and cultural modifiers of schools. Tracks sort and separate students. But they also create within them high-track and low-track cultures that emphasize independence and self-expression on the one hand and control and conformity on the other (Oakes, 1985; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1991). Whereas some argue that students choose low-track classes because they are "easier," we argue that the connection between students and the courses they choose is more complex (Loveless, 1999). Track structures and the identities that they foster within schools help to shape students' aspirations and influence how students use choice-based placement policies.

The Leveled

Social reproduction theorists who examine student agency, societal structures, and aspirations have argued that "leveled aspirations" are an important aspect of how lower-class students end up disenfranchised from education. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of students' "habitus," or perceptions of their own status and ability and of where they "fit" in the social structure,⁵ MacLeod (1987) demonstrates how working-class and poor boys from housing projects became disillusioned with the "American Dream." On their way to these leveled aspirations, some of the young men resisted and actively rejected the education system's "meritocratic" ideology, which told them that if they worked hard they would get ahead. Others bought into the promise of social mobility through educational achievement and eventually came to blame themselves for not "making it."

In the schools we studied, we encountered low- and middle-track students whose habitus helped them to assess the spatial identity of classes and steered them away from higher-track classes. We note several instances when these students hesitated to move into more challenging classes, even when encouraged to do so by educators. We also note how parents and other educators who had come to view these students as unable to compete in the high track reinforced the leveled aspirations of these low-track students.

At Grant High, for example, where the elite top-tier classes had grown increasingly high-status and competitive each year, students from the vocational track—most of whom were African American—were often intimidated by the “aura” of honors courses. These students had little specific information about the courses; still, they often assumed that high-track classes were places where students “like them” did not belong. Many of these students insisted that they were “not good at” honors, despite the fact that they had never taken an honors course and knew few students who did.

Similarly, at Central High, students admitted that they did not sign up for honors courses because they either “didn’t feel confident enough to pick the college-prep classes” or because they didn’t think they could handle the extra work that they suspected honors classes entailed. “I knew about them, I just didn’t think I had what it takes,” said one Central student. At Plainview High, a teacher stated that many African-American students he spoke to had “limited ambitions” when it came to school. A Green Valley High teacher reported that some Green Valley Latino students and parents possessed a “mental picture in their mind of their ability” and thus where they fit in at the school. He said these families often requested “just enough to graduate” and rarely requested honors courses.

Whereas some low-track students operated from leveled aspirations, others held more hope. These students wavered between wanting to try more challenging courses and feeling unsure that they would succeed. For instance, at Plainview High, where AP courses abound, a low-track African-American freshman expressed his ambivalence about attempting an honors course:

I think about it once in awhile, but I’m not sure yet. It depends. I’m half and half. One part of my body says go for it, the other part says don’t go for it. So I try and listen to the other half of it. Sometimes I try not to listen to the other half, sometimes I go for a challenging thing.

Leaving the low track was not an easy decision for many of these students. Many students had experienced school from the bottom of the tracked hierarchy for so long that they had come to identify themselves as “low-track” or “slow.” When left to their own devices, they chose familiar spaces with familiar faces, resegregating themselves along the same lines and labels.

A few critically minded educators worried about self-tracking, yet most teachers and counselors gave only gentle suggestions to leveled students. “They really don’t sweat about the harder classes. If you don’t want [or] feel like taking a harder class, they don’t sweat it. They tell you that if that’s what you want to do, go for it then,” explained one low-track student. When educators tried to convince students to take honors courses, they often tempered their advice with a touch of realism, which “cooled out”⁶ rather than raised low-track students’ aspirations (Clark, 1960). One low-track African-American boy from Grant High recalled how his counselor “encouraged” him to opt for honors:

Interviewer: Do they ever try to push you and say, come on, we’re going to make you . . . we want you to give it a try?

Student: Yeah, they, they asked me to give it a try, she [his counselor] said, "Won't you give it a try?" And she said . . . "Who knows, if you work real hard, you can probably . . . keep up." "I have to work hard to keep up?" I said, "No, that's all right, I think that if I gotta work hard to keep up, then I ain't gonna make it."

Students with leveled aspirations rarely chose higher courses because educators and their peers had told them for many years where they did and did not belong within the hierarchical spaces of their schools. Over time, the students' recognition that they occupy a low-status place becomes central to their habitus. Not until an educator, parent, or mentor challenges these schemes of perception directly and changes the students' understanding of themselves as others see them will many formerly low-track students choose high-track classes. In the words of this Grant High teacher,

Self-selection at this high school is self-tracking. I mean it is tracking. If they've been tracked from K-8, they know how to track themselves. They know exactly what level they are. They know the names they've been given up through eighth grade, and they will reroute right back to it at the junior and senior level. . . . And they do, unless a counselor intervenes . . . and says, "You've had scores that show there's a brain up there. Stop taking these mediocre classes. It's okay." Unless that happens with some sort of face-to-face confrontation, those kids just go right on doing what they know so well, and they take the path of least resistance.

The Entitled

In drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Harrison (1993) writes that struggles related to domination and oppression are not simply about inequitable distribution of material goods but also involve "the arbitrary principles of social classification." One of the most powerful social classifications is the entitlement of those with privilege and status.

Those with greater economic or cultural capital legitimize their higher status in society by claiming it as their entitlement (Harrison, 1993). The educational system contributes to this legitimization process by labeling certain students as "gifted and talented," or "advanced," at a very young age (Barr & Dreeben, 1983; Gamoran, 1986; Good & Brophy, 1987; Slavin, 1987). The seemingly meritocratic way in which students "earn" these titles and are placed accordingly into their "proper" spaces within the educational system is an important aspect of the social consecration of the intergenerational transmission of privilege. Students who are labeled gifted in elementary school develop a habitus of entitlement. They, unlike the students with leveled aspirations, see high-track classes as their destiny.

In the six high schools we studied, some students saw their honors placement as the result of a natural progression: "Last year I had honors English, so I just took honors English again, and I had honors Algebra, so I'm taking honors Geometry," said one student. Many others couldn't recall how

they had become honors students. As one Plainview High 12th-grader said, honors classes were “just kind of programmed in me.”

Yet, despite these students’ remarks, the high-track, high-achieving students in the schools we studied did not sit idly by and allow themselves to be passed through the educational system. Rather, these students and their parents operated from powerful places in the local hierarchy to reinforce existing educational inequities and garner the best teachers and courses. Their actions ensured that the choice-based policies that some educators had hoped would assist low-track students in moving up the tracking hierarchy instead protected high-track students’ elite classes. In this way, our findings cohere with past research on the activities of middle- and upper-class parents (Lareau, 1989; David, 1993; Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Useem, 1992). They also extend past research by placing these parents’ activities within the context of schools’ detracking efforts.

We found a particularly vivid example of entitled students at Liberty High School, where more than 85% of the school’s graduates went on to two- and four-year colleges and where academic credentials signaled status in the local community. Here, high-track students supported a self-scheduling process because it allowed them to choose challenging courses taught by demanding teachers. Self-scheduling, as one student argued, lessened the risk that they would end up in classes with students who “just didn’t want to learn”:

I know that I am getting a good education because I picked the hard teachers. A lot of students just go for the easy teachers. . . . They might [not] get the best education, but at least they might go to class and not mess anybody else up.

Entitled Liberty students and parents also supported choice policies because they allowed families to secure the best teachers and placements. This occurred usually at the school’s summer “tennis shoe registration,” where students raced competitively around the school gymnasium to gather enrollment passes from teachers on a first-come, first-served basis. At tennis shoe registration, entitled students and their parents volunteered to dole out enrollment cards to the student body and would often be caught by educators “pulling cards for their friends,” allowing them to enroll ahead of other students.

Self-scheduling at Liberty High enhanced the sense of entitlement of high-track students and parents and helped them to secure preferential placements at the school. Several Liberty High educators complained that parental involvement, sheer luck, and blatant discrimination were often better predictors of student placement than prior achievement or motivation. Self-scheduling was difficult to dismantle, however, since it was favored by Liberty High parents—“those who are outspoken, who come to PTA meetings, who generally tend to be White, upper-middle, middle-class, educated.”⁷

We examined the responses of the so-called “entitled” families as they operated within course choice to better understand how their efforts helped

to maintain hierarchical track structures in which some students continued to receive far less. We do not intend our work to be a criticism of the families. Yet we believe it is important to describe the practices of the “entitled” as their actions affect their schools, communities, and society.

Theme 3: Choosing Respect

This section reveals why some low-income African-American and Latino students resisted higher-track classes, even when they felt that they were highly capable. Some students resisted higher placements because they believed that such courses required them to abandon their friends and buy into the existing hierarchy. Others rejected high-track classes because they believed—or knew from experience—that their contributions in these classes would not be valued. A smaller number of students critiqued the ideology of privilege in high-track classes. All sought places where they felt respected and valued by their teachers and peers and avoided places where they felt excluded or disrespected.

Wanting to Be With People Whom You Respect: “The Pull of the Peer Group”

Students tend to form friendships within assigned tracks; this social separation, and the racial and socioeconomic segregation that can accompany it, increases as students move from elementary to secondary schools (Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1991; Hallinan & Williams, 1989; Hallinan & Sorenson, 1985). Thus track structures can exacerbate within-school social segregation (Braddock & Slavin, 1993; Cooper, 1996) and impede students’ access to rich post-secondary information networks (Wells & Crain, 1994).

Yet students’ tendency to make friends with peers of like racial and socioeconomic backgrounds can also provide low-income students and students of color with a sense of belonging and identity (Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Eckert, 1989; Fordham, 1996; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996; Tatum, 1997). How racially identifiable peer groups influence students’ academic aspirations and achievement is unclear. Research has shown that these race- and class-specific peer cultures can sometimes oppose (Comer, 1976; Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 1988) and sometimes support academic achievement (Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Mehan et al., 1996). We suggest that tracks exist as spaces where identity formation and student achievement ideology meet.

We found evidence that some Black students were apprehensive about majority-White honors courses for fear of being ostracized by Black peers. Black students at some of the schools reported that some Black peers used name-calling (e.g., “sellout” or “Whitewashed”) to deter other Black students from developing relationships with White students. At one school, for example, a Black female honors student was labeled “a female version of Clarence Thomas” because of the White company she kept. A teacher at another school spoke of several Black students who “knew they were capable of doing honors work and weren’t doing it because they wouldn’t want to deal with the grief they would take for leaving their peer groups.” This supports

Fordham's (1996) argument that Black Americans sometimes pressure each another to avoid "acting White" and hooks's (1992) discussion of how some Black women assert "false authenticity" over one another.

More commonly, however, Black and Latino students at the schools we studied shunned honors courses because they were reluctant to give up the supportive peer networks they had developed among their lower-track peers. These supportive relationships provided a comfortable place in which to live and learn. For instance, one African-American student stated that he preferred taking classes with other Black students because doing so reflected his life outside school: "I am with my own people when I go home. I'm with my own people before school. I wake up with my own people." It helped him remain, in the words of another student, "super-Black."

Because African-American and Latino students in the six high schools relied on their racially segregated peer groups for social support, those who decided to leave the lower tracks often felt isolated. For example, at Plainview High, only 10 of the school's 350 Black students enrolled in any of the 18 AP classes offered. Black students reported that they felt uncomfortable in honors and AP courses, where they were the "only Black in the room." When counselors encouraged them to enroll in AP courses, they resisted: "I can't be in there. I'm the only Black student in there." Or "I feel weird in this class because I'm the only Black student. None of my friends are there." Black students at Liberty High voiced similar complaints: "At the beginning of the school year I was in AP Chemistry, and that's like first-year college chemistry. I was the only Black student in there, and I was uncomfortable," said one Liberty High honors student.

These students' actions and comments show that choosing higher-track placements involve more than a simple structural rearrangement. It requires that students in lower tracks be willing to abandon peer group ideologies and identities that they have formed. Thus choice as a mechanism for detracking burdens low-track, Black, and Latino adolescents who might desire high-status courses but who also want the respect, admiration, and companionship of other students like them. The struggle students face is described in a student article published in the Grant High newspaper:

In my three years at Grant, I have seen a maximum of four Black students in my honors classes. Are we as a school saying there are only four Black students out of 620 in our school who are honors material and college bound? Whether Black students at Grant feel intimidated or unequal, or if there is just no opportunity for them, the honors program is failing to represent the true makeup of the school. The few minorities in honors classes usually have to choose between being with people of their own background or getting an honors education.

Not Wanting to Be With People Who Don't Respect You

Whereas in some cases the pull of the peer group kept students from moving up, in other cases students of color remained in lower-level courses because past experience told them that teachers and students in advanced

courses did not value them or the knowledge they brought to the classroom. These students did not struggle with the high-track curriculum, but with the courses' teaching practices and student-to-student interactions. The way teachers taught and how peers related (or refused to relate) to them affected their adjustment to the high track. This supports Ladson-Billings's (1994) argument that it is not just what we teach to culturally diverse students but "the way we teach" that matters.

One experience for many students of color was unwelcome salience in their honors classrooms. As minorities in majority White classrooms, these students felt compelled to justify their presence in their schools' high-track classes. Their words, which describe their life under the spotlight, capture best the barriers they faced.

I feel that I have to defend every Black person that's in there. Like the token person. So, in general, I feel like I have to prove something extra to the White kids that are in there. Even if I know a piece of literature well, I feel like I have to study it over and over.

This student recalled how he felt in his honors math class:

I was swearing because I was like, "Oh man, I don't even belong in here," because it was like 30 Caucasian kids and one African student. I felt like I had to prove myself and prove that Blacks aren't stupid. [I felt like] if I were to get a problem wrong and raise my hand, they would look at me and say, "Ah, that Black." I was always under pressure, so . . . I transferred to just [the] advanced level.

These formerly low-track students of color carried into honors classes the double burden of justifying both their own capability and the capability of their race. This subtle form of discrimination was all the more onerous because the classes were devoid of the race-specific support groups that these students had enjoyed in lower-level classes.

Sometimes it made it hard when you needed to study and stuff. A lot of times I found myself studying on my own. Or if there was another Black person in there, or two or three other [Black] people in there, we could form a study group. But most of the time, if I didn't want to be around those [White] people, I just had to make it on my own.

Moreover, even if their AP classmates had encouraged them to join their study groups, the students of color hesitated to approach their classmates for fear that doing so would fuel suspicions that they were incompetent. Said one student,

I had nobody to relate to in that class or any friends. I didn't have any friends in that class. I had acquaintances, but as far as going to them for information, that's just like raising your hand with the wrong answers.

The discrimination these students experienced in honors and AP courses was not blatant. Some students of color believed their White classmates did not mean to discriminate but were acting in ways that fit with their daily lives and past experience, reaching out to peers with whom they were most familiar and felt most comfortable.

You could have three books on your desk and have five thousand pieces of paper and four or five pencils and the White students would reach around you [to] a friend they knew.

But the fact that the discrimination was not malicious did not make it easier to endure. Although subtle, it was insidious and painful, as this Central student explained:

The racial tension is not in the materialized form where you can see it, but you can feel it. It's like if I was to answer a question, they would look at me kind of funny, especially if it was the wrong answer—not necessarily the answer the teacher was looking for.

In sum, formerly low- and middle-track African-American and Latino students entered high-track classrooms knowing that their appearance and accents often caused their teachers and classmates to question their presence. The sidelong glances and unkind whispers of the “entitled”—those individuals who had the luxury of not having their positionality questioned—constantly reminded these students of their “inability to fit in” (Ellis, 1993). Their experiences fit with Weber’s (1978) description of the continuing social estimation that protects high-status groups (e.g., upper-track classes) from those unable to reflect the “style of life”—the viewpoints and culture—normal in elite circles. Furthermore, it supports Sanchez-Jankowski’s (1995) argument that relationships among status groups (e.g., high-track and low-track) are the dynamic shaping race relations as well.

As these students struggled to find a place in high-track classes, they found that their contradictory identities as successful students and under-represented minorities made it difficult for them to be accepted. Removed from their own people and rejected by those in high-track classrooms, many reverted to the relative safety of lower-level classes, where they found support for their evolving ideology of resistance.

Wanting to Be Able to Respect Yourself

Another reason why some low-track students refused to choose high-track courses was their belief that education should reflect their culture, knowledge, and lived experiences. These students critiqued the education they received and sought out “safe spaces” or “homeplaces,” where they could explore their identities as racial minorities and strengthen their sense of self-worth, free from the domination they experienced in daily life (Hill-Collins, 1991; hooks, 1990).

At times, these students engaged in “placemaking”—the forging of public spaces that shield their members from racist domination and allow critical consciousness and group solidarity to emerge—with educators and peers to turn low-track classrooms and programs for particular racial groups into places of resistance. Through their efforts, these students recognized the political nature of education and developed identities consistent with an ideology of resistance (Haymes, 1995; Fine, Weis, & Powell, 1997).

At Liberty High School, for example, critically conscious African-American students frequently rejected honors courses, opting instead for courses in the African-American Studies Department. This department was seen by many African-American students as a safe haven where they could come and freely express their views without fear of reprisals from other students and teachers. Classes such as African-American History or African-American Journalism gave students space to talk about race and class, topics often avoided in other courses. According to one student, Liberty’s African-American Studies Department provided Black students with a place to affirm one another.

Because Liberty allowed students to take up to four years of African-American literature to satisfy their English and history graduation requirements, Black students who felt as though their history and culture were ignored in honors and AP courses could avoid taking those high-status classes. Even after Liberty educators loosened prerequisites to the honors track, few low- or middle-track Black students transferred. For many Black students at Liberty, the self-respect they gained from African-American studies classes outweighed extra grade points or college credit available in honors or AP classes. As one African-American student explained, the difference between classes in the African-American Studies Department and other classes was “a sense of self respect.”

At Grant as well, some Black students told us that high-track benefits were a poor trade for the dignity they felt in majority-Black classes. For example, one African-American girl stated that she preferred remaining in Grant’s segregated classrooms: “I like the fact that it’s segregated. I don’t really want to sit next to no White person or in back of a White person or in front of a White person and learn. I want to learn with my own people, and with my own teachers.” Another Grant student said that she remained in majority-Black classrooms because honors classes focused only on “White history, White this, White that. Everything is European.” Grant’s assistant principal said that many low-tracked students, particularly African Americans, rejected honors courses because they believed that the curriculum did not address where they were “coming from.”

Assistant Principal:

In most cases, particularly for African-American men, . . . it’s not that they can’t get in [to honors classes], it’s that they choose not to go in . . . because, one, the curriculum across the United States is not focusing on the culture or the diversity of the Afro-American male or the Hispanic male. . . . It’s not addressing where they’re coming from.

Interviewer:

And that’s more true in the honors classes than in the regular classes?

Assistant Principal: Yes, the honors classes. You know, I'm not saying that all Afro-American males are not that interested. But we have to find a different way . . . to address that.

At Green Valley High, Latino students gathered in the school's Mexican-American history class, where they felt supported by the course's Latino teacher and by their Latino peers. Students signed up for this elective class even though it did not satisfy college entrance requirements, because they wanted, as one Latina student explained, "to learn a little bit more about [their] background, [their] ancestors." Students also were drawn to a teacher who they believed wanted to teach them and a curriculum that they felt valued their home cultures. One Latino student shared his belief that his teacher would help him and his classmates and could be counted on to "stick up for us." In some cases, Latino students rejected college-preparatory electives such as a foreign language to make room in their schedules for the Mexican-American history class.

The dilemma faced by many minority students when forced to decide between high-track courses and these safe spaces often resulted in their choosing to stay where they felt comfortable and powerful. For these students, developing a strong political ideology that would help them resist the racist domination they encountered on a daily basis was more important than college credit or extra GPA points. Only occasionally did we find students who used the strength and self-confidence that they had developed in their safe spaces to enroll in and complete high-track courses. Such was the experience of one Black student from Liberty, who talked about how his experiences in the African-American Studies Department enabled him to succeed in college-preparatory classes:

What I said earlier about how interesting it is learning about yourself, I am proof of that. Look at my transcript. I didn't have African American Studies classes until the 11th grade. In the 9th grade I had a 1.8 GPA overall. Tenth grade I had a 1.9. Eleventh grade I had a 3.1 and now this year I have a 3.3. So I'm still taking the college-prep, White classes.

Discussion

This article has shown that using choice as a detracking tool is unlikely to change the racial and socioeconomic stratification of track systems because it fails to tackle track structures and to address sufficiently the cultural link between students' identities and places they occupy in track hierarchies and surrounding communities. We come to this conclusion because of evidence that at the six high schools we studied, low-track students, particularly students of color, did not take advantage of seemingly open doors to honors courses. They did not advance into honors courses, as some educators had hoped, for a variety of interrelated reasons: institutional barriers, feelings of inadequacy, and a determination not to leave the safe spaces they knew in

low- and middle-track classes, made up mostly of minority students, for seats in majority-White honors courses where they felt unwelcome.

In some cases, structural barriers hampered students who attempted to choose more-challenging classes. Uneven information made it difficult for them to choose courses or even to know that such choices existed. Educators' selective flexibility and hidden prerequisites limited student choice. The experiences of these students tell us that a broad-based choice policy is inadequate to alter structural barriers within the tracking process.

But many students, even those who knew they could enroll in higher courses, encountered cultural difficulties, which underscored the fact that the physical and political spaces people fill are inextricably woven with their identities and ideologies. For these students, the institutional barriers that their peers encountered were not the hindrance. Rather, moving between worlds at political odds with one another in ways that forced them to reassess their sense of self and of society was the primary dilemma. For minorities working their way through majority-dominant institutions, this reassessment of oneself and one's ideology is arduous and explains why some successful African-American and Latino students choose to remain in middle-to-low-tracked classes where they feel more comfortable.

What do our findings mean for schools engaged in detracking and for the larger education reform community? Foremost, they suggest that choice is insufficient for detracking reform and perhaps for other equity-minded reforms as well. Even if the institutional barriers to choice were addressed, many of the students studied would not have left their low- and middle-track classes for honors courses because they felt that doing so was undesirable. In this way, efforts to detrack via choice wrestle with the same challenges that school choice policies do: Both struggle to account for the complex and overlapping variables that shape individuals' decisions (Wells, 1993b; McKinney, 1996).

The fundamental difficulty with using choice as a strategy for detracking is that it aims to create more diverse, yet still hierarchical, courses. Thus it does little to alter prevailing track structures. Detracking via choice maintains the structures that remind formerly middle- or low-track students of their prior relationships to school and continues to tie these students' peers and former teachers to lower-level tracked spaces.

Let us be clear. We are not saying that increasing the numbers of minority and low-income students in top-tier courses is pointless. Doing so is an important short-term goal, as these courses have real import in student learning and capital, particularly in the post-secondary market, which continues to grant extra grade points and other distinctions to students who take honors and advanced placement courses. Our caution is that attempts to increase the number of minority and low-income students in high-level courses through choice-oriented policies do little to alter the fundamental track structures within schools that serve to disadvantage most minority and low-income students.

How can fundamental track structures be dismantled? We are not sure. Welner and Oakes (1996) suggest that for intractable cases, court-mandated

detracking may help and may force educators to tackle cultural impediments to detracking such as teachers' expectations and school cultures that promote inequity. They provide compelling evidence from court orders to support their position (see also Welner, 2001).

If detracking were initiated through top-down mandates, it is unclear if the impediments that we uncovered in detracking via choice would continue to undermine the reform. Dismantling tracked spaces might encourage students to think differently about their academic identities. Yet beliefs by students that they are "fast" or "slow" learners and efforts by local educators to subvert detracking through hidden prerequisites are rooted in cultural norms that persist outside school. Thus it is unlikely that the dismantling of tracked courses alone might eliminate these more culturally based barriers.

The interdependence of tracking structures and cultures and its manifestation in the elementary and middle grades further suggest that detracking must do more than change which students take which classes or how many minority and low-income students enroll in elite courses. Children's academic identities may be influenced early as tracking structures and cultures sort them into fast and slow reading groups, "gifted" classes or groups, and sometimes seemingly innocuous classifications such as the "gold track" or the "bluebird" team (Lareau, 1989; Slavin, 1987).

Despite the seemingly intractable nature of tracking, however, we suggest one potential, and admittedly partial, remedy in high schools: the creation of safe spaces alongside detracking. The findings from this study underline the importance of working within schools to create safe spaces or homeplaces, sites where people can reconstruct their knowledge and come to understand new possibilities (Hill-Collins, 1991; hooks, 1990; Thompson & Gitlin, 1995). By participating in such spaces, students and educators can create new relationships between their places in school and their academic and personal identities. This would not, of course, remedy the insidious early tracking practices that we see in the presecondary grades, but it can support students who grapple with the current effects of past tracked experiences early in their educational careers.

In the present study, ethnic programs and particularly supportive lower-track classrooms were safe spaces sought out by low- and middle-track students of color. These places made students feel valued and powerful. Ethnic programs are not the only types of safe spaces that might be created. Some argue that they exacerbate problems of social segregation. We do not advocate for or against the creation of such programs. What we do believe is that the deliberate creation of various types of safe spaces in schools may help both detracking reform in particular and equity-minded reforms generally.

We are not alone in our call for such places. A few researchers and theorists have described various forms that such safe spaces can take in schools engaged in equity-minded reform. Researchers on interracial relations within schools (see Hawley & Jackson, 1995) and others argue that students need safe spaces within schools where they can challenge the identities thrust upon them by the larger society (Fine, Weis, and Powell, 1997; Gutierrez, Rymes,

& Larson, 1995; Roemer, 1991). Fine, Weis, and Powell (1997), for example, describe one high school's attempt to detrack its ninth-grade English classes by creating heterogeneous, multicultural world literature courses as a "safe space for authentic integration." The safe spaces included teacher leaders who, guided by curriculum that invited difference and decentered privilege, sought to have all students "over time and unevenly, recognize that they can speak and that they deserve an audience" (p. 274).

Building on Goffman's notion of underlife, Gutierrez, Rymes, and Larson (1995) found a safe space (or in their case "third space") where students and teachers came together to redefine whose knowledge is valued and whose voices are heard. Their work argues for classrooms where identities, roles, and interactions are broken down and reconstructed in ways that allow all participants to redefine themselves and their relationships with each other and the outside world.

Roemer (1991) argues that the creation of safe spaces in schools is important to support teachers engaged in the difficult work of school reform. Following her account of the multiple voices and perspectives that affected one school-university collaboration on writing portfolios, Roemer concludes that educators engaged in inquiry-based reform must have the opportunity meet in a "relatively free space." That is, finding a place where "the time, space, and power constraints of our daily lives and our relative positions seems crucial to promote the sort of exchange that brings real change" (p. 446).

The voices of the students we studied convince us that—alongside the dismantling of track structures—there must be forthright efforts to support the deliberate creation of inclusive, respectful spaces. These spaces must grant students and teachers opportunities to reclaim identity and reconstruct relationships to support long-term detracking and equity-centered educational change. For, in the words of Thompson and Gitlin (1995),

The creating of spaces lends itself to the possibility of changing relationships in ways that problematize co-ordered power and that engender new habits, expectations, and notions of appropriateness (p. 148).

Conclusion

The insights of educators, students, and parents experiencing choice firsthand as a mechanism for detracking have taught us that reducing tracking must involve more than the altering of placement policies and reorganization of students in courses. It must also involve a reconfiguration and redefinition of space as an important means to balancing power and reclaiming identity. As schools detrack, educators and students must question the hierarchies that exist and how these hierarchies create separate spaces within schools, spaces that carry within them important meanings that affect students' perceptions of self and belonging. Educators cannot assume that students will push themselves into higher course placements despite major institutional and socially constructed obstacles.

Through the voices of the students and educators in this article, we hope that all concerned will understand that detracking is not merely a process of opening doors between separate and unequal classrooms. Rather, detracking must involve questioning why we continue to build walls that divide and stratify students based on narrow constructions of students' merit and the value of their lived experiences. Efforts to detrack must involve more than moving students across tracked spaces; detracking must reconstruct and redefine what these spaces mean by attending to how they shape and codify the identities of individuals within them.

Notes

¹ We recognize that there is a great deal of disagreement among educational researchers about what constitutes tracking and ability grouping. We address this issue later under the heading "Tracking, Ability Grouping, and Detracking: Unpacking the Concepts and Reforms." However, for the purposes of this article, we see course-by-course ability grouping as often leading to de facto tracking. Such practices led the people in the schools that we studied to label their reform efforts "detracking." In our effort to be true to the stories and struggles of the people in these schools, we use their preferred term to describe the structures and practices of their schools.

² Our research team included Jeannie Oakes and Amy Stuart Wells as co-principal investigators. Robert Cooper, Amanda Datnow, Diane Hirshberg, Martin Lipton, Karen Ray, Irene Serna, Estella Williams, and Susan Yonezawa assisted with data collection, analyses, and write-ups.

³ The educators in the schools studied defined "heterogeneous" classes as those containing a mix of students by perceived ability. We use the term here in the same way that the educators did to convey how they understood the reform.

⁴ Collecting such quantitative data at these schools was virtually impossible because each school was at a different point in implementing detracking reform when the study began. Therefore, we lacked consistent baseline data on student enrollment in various levels of classes by race and socioeconomic status prior to the reform. Moreover, the focus of the study was how educators and students made meaning of their efforts to detrack the school and to understand better resistance to such change.

⁵ "Habitus" is a continuously evolving construct that is nondeterministic but also cumulative, bearing the weight of one's previous experiences and interactions (Harker, 1984).

⁶ Clark (1960) described cooling out as a lengthy counseling process whose purpose is to convince students through subtle and not-so-subtle means that their aspirations are unrealistic, such that the students eventually withdraw from the academic competition.

⁷ Some of these White, upper-middle class, educated parents closely resembled the parents studied by Brantlinger, Majd-Jabbari, and Guskin (1996). These researchers found that the mothers they interviewed often espoused an inclusive liberal ideology but acted in much more self-interested ways that promoted the advance of middle-class students and the maintenance of stratified school structures (i.e., tracking).

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