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Tracking Detracking: Sorting Through the Dilemmas and Possibilities of Detracking in Practice

Beth C. Rubin and Pedro A. Noguera

Tracking, the sorting and grouping of students in schools, has been criticized for separating students along race and class lines, re-segregating diverse schools and perpetuating unequal access to a college-bound curriculum. Detracking, a reform in which students are placed intentionally in mixed-ability classes, is an attempt to remedy the negative effects of tracking. In this “think piece,” the authors review the relevant literature and reflect upon their experiences teaching and researching in detracked classrooms, presenting several dilemmas apparent within detracked classrooms and identifying a number of practices that have proven successful at meeting students’ needs in these classrooms. The authors argue that if detracking is to achieve its aims, it must be part of more comprehensive reform aimed at the equitable redistribution of resources and opportunities within schools, deliberately placing the needs of previously underserved students at the center of reform initiatives.

“Just take them out of those tracks!” a veteran teacher exclaims, responding to another teacher’s description of the racially segregated classrooms at a rigidly tracked high school. Her anger stems from the realization that the “tracks” have transformed what should be a racially integrated school into one that is segregated from within.

Educators across the nation increasingly express such sentiments. The process, most commonly referred to as tracking, is widely practiced in public schools throughout the United States. Most often it is a process through which students are sorted and grouped, based on some measure or perception of their academic ability. The logic behind the process is that once the students are separated, developmentally appropriate curriculum can be provided that corresponds to their particular academic needs and abilities. As noted above, however, tracking often serves to separate students along race and class lines, re-segregating diverse schools and raising questions about equal access to a college-bound curriculum.

Detracking, a reform in which students are placed intentionally in mixed-ability classes and groups, is an attempt to remedy the negative effects of tracking. This article is a “think piece” that reviews and links current literature on detracking to understandings gathered from our collective work teaching and researching in detracked classrooms over the past 15 years. During this

time we observed and experienced both the agonizing dilemmas and the intense excitement of a promising reform. In this article we reflect upon several of these dilemmas and identify a number of practices that appear to be successful in detracked classrooms. Most importantly, through this article we seek to move policy discussions related to detracking to a deeper level by looking at how school and societal structures are implicated in the success or failure of detracking as an equity-oriented reform. If detracking is to achieve its primary aims—providing the opportunity for all students to engage with high-level teaching and a rich curriculum—we argue, it must be part of comprehensive reform aimed at the more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities within schools. Such a strategy deliberately places the needs of previously underserved students at the center of reform initiatives, and must be central to any effort to reduce racial and socioeconomic disparities in academic achievement.

BACKGROUND

Tracking Critiqued

For the last 30 years a growing chorus of educational researchers has criticized tracking and other forms of ability grouping as an inequitable educational practice (Bowles, 1977; Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1977; Mehan, 1992; Oakes, 1985; Slavin, 1993; Tate, 1994; Welner & Oakes, 1996; Wheelock, 1992). The basis of this critique is that tracking serves to perpetuate and reinforce educational

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inequities along race and class lines. In most schools, placement in designated tracks corresponds strikingly with race and class privilege. Upper tracks, including honors, gifted, and advanced placement courses, have disproportionate numbers of students from affluent backgrounds, while the lower tracks, especially remedial and special education courses, are filled with poor and economically disadvantaged students. In many communities, tracking has a profound impact on efforts to create racial balance within schools and classrooms because students of color, especially African American, Latino, Native American, and some Southeast Asian immigrants, are more likely to be relegated to the lower tracks, while affluent European American and Asian American students are concentrated in the higher tracks.

Tracking critics advocate eliminating, or at the minimum, reducing the inequities created by this educational practice. They point out that once children are placed in lower track classes (in some places this may begin in elementary schools with the creation of reading groups), they are more likely to encounter lower teacher expectations, a watered-down curriculum, and inferior instructional materials (Gamoran, 1992; Oakes, 1985; Page, 1987; Wheelock, 1992). In many school districts it is common to assign new teachers and teachers who are not regarded as being particularly effective, to lower track classes, while more experienced and knowledgeable teachers are assigned to teach higher tracked students. Finally, perhaps the greatest indictment of tracking is that it is rare for students who are placed in the lower tracks to be given the opportunity to "catch up" and move on to higher tracks. Once the die is cast, the designation for most students is permanent, unless they, their parents, or some adult acting on their behalf, advocates effectively for a change in placement (Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997).

Detracking Reform

As awareness of the inequities related to tracking grew, some schools and districts attempted to move away from tracking (Oakes, Quartz, Ryan, & Lipton, 2000). In some communities, such reform was compelled by lawsuits and court orders when judges ruled that tracking constituted a form of racial discrimination (Welner & Oakes, 1996). In other districts, detracking has been embraced as part of a larger effort to promote greater equity in academic outcomes (Noguera, 2001; Oakes et al., 2000).

Though 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 meaningful access to high quality curriculum, teachers, and material resources. In some schools, detracking efforts may be limited to particular subject areas, most often, lan-

guage arts and social studies (Cone, 1992; Cooper, 1996; Rubin, 2003b, 2003c) or even a specific grade level (Fine, Weis & Powell, 1997; Lipman, 1998). Others schools have taken the approach of allowing students to self-select into higher level classes, maintaining tracks but theoretically providing greater access to previously exclusive courses (Yonezawa, Wells & Serna, 2002). Still other detracking efforts have taken a more incremental approach by selecting a small number of "high potential, low achieving" students of color and moving these students into a higher academic track. Such efforts often include an attempt to enroll such students in a specially designed support class aimed at increasing their chances at college admission (Mehan et al., 1994; Swanson, 1993). Some schools have gone even further and taken the dramatic step of eliminating tracking in all its forms and manifestations (Wheelock, 1994).

As might be expected, 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, who 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 et al., 2000; Wells & Serna, 1996; Welner, 2001). In other communities, opponents of tracking have squared off with its defenders in drawn out conflicts over the issue that have involved legal challenges, the use of local referendums, and even street protests (Oakes et al., 1997).

The wide range of reforms that fall under the label of detracking makes it difficult to assess the impact of detracking upon students. Quantitative studies are inconclusive, with researchers claiming both positive (Oakes, 1993; Slavin, 1988, 1991, 1993, 1995) and negative (Allen, 1991; Brewer, Rees, & Argys, 1995; Feldhusen, 1991; Gallagher, 1995; Kulik, 1991; Scott, 1993) effects for detracking. Much of the qualitative research on detracking focuses on community and school conflicts over the issue rather than its effects upon student achievement (Cooper, 1996; Oakes et al., 1997; Wells & Serna, 1996). From these studies of school and community discourse we know that the implementation of detracking at a school brings many power dynamics into play, especially in racially and socioeconomically diverse communities. These findings are useful for those attempting to implement detracking at an institutional level, but offer little insight into the challenges of teaching and learning that occur *inside* detracked classrooms.

Both authors have been involved with over 25 public middle and high schools implementing varying degrees of detracking reform: Rubin as a high school teacher and university-based researcher and Noguera as a high school teacher, university-based researcher, school board member, and advisor/consultant. These include schools

with a variety of characteristics: large, small, urban, suburban, racially and socioeconomically integrated, predominantly African American and Latino, predominantly working class, predominantly White, and predominantly wealthy. We have come to the conclusion that detracking is not quite as simple as either its defenders or its detractors typically portray it. While we concur with most of the arguments against tracking, our research, teaching, and other experience has led us to a more nuanced view of detracking as an alternative.

The logic behind detracking seems sensible: tracking is at least in part responsible for perpetuating educational inequalities, therefore detracking should reverse this inequity. However, as any experienced teacher can tell you, “tracking” and “detracking” are not the equivalent of “forward” and “reverse” on a car. We have seen how the idealized vision of the detracked classroom becomes more complicated in reality; complications that have caused some districts to abandon detracking efforts not long after they have been implemented. We also have observed teachers who have developed instructional strategies that have enabled them to experience considerable success in detracked classrooms. Such examples lead us to maintain hope in the possibility that detracking can be a successful reform strategy. The remainder of this article describes these observations:¹ the dilemmas associated with detracking, the possibilities it holds, and best practices.

DETRACKING DILEMMAS

For teachers and students, detracking presents a variety of dilemmas, both social and academic in nature. These dilemmas complicate the achievement of increased equity, access to college prep courses, and democratization, all of which are regarded as central goals of the reform. While these goals are clearly admirable, failure to anticipate the various dilemmas that are likely to arise as a result of detracking will increase the likelihood that the reform will not succeed.

Social Dilemmas

Social Integration Clouding other Detracking Goals. We have observed that many detracking efforts seem to have been started with the goal of social integration of students from different backgrounds. While this may be an important goal, it may at times take on greater importance than the goal of engaging more students in rich learning experiences in order to rectify educational inequalities. We have seen from the experience of a number of schools that the two goals are not equivalent. For example, in one racially and socioeconomically integrated urban school, teachers in a detracked ninth grade program were surveyed as part of the school’s action-research project. Almost all of these teachers, when asked

about the purposes of detracking, defined the principal goal of the program as creating community among students from diverse backgrounds. These teachers overwhelmingly judged the program to be a success because students appeared to “get along” with each other. Yet, the survey also revealed that many teachers feared that some students were being left behind academically, while others were being held back due to the slower pace of the course, and school-generated data indicated that detracking had not resulted in greater academic achievement by poor students and students of color.

Confusing social integration in the classroom with academic equity is problematic. For over 20 years, there has been considerable evidence that support for the goal of racial integration in school has been waning (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). Many parents will be unwilling to support detracking efforts if social integration is perceived as the only benefit and justification for the reform. Moreover, if low achieving students are to reap educational benefits from detracking it will be due to enhanced learning opportunities and not merely because they attend the same classes as more privileged students, as will be discussed below.

Difficulties Breaking Down Social Barriers between Students. Although detracked classrooms are deliberately heterogeneous in terms of student ability and racial and socioeconomic background, this does not necessarily mean that students interact freely in these classrooms or form close social relationships by virtue of sitting beside one another. In the schools with which we are familiar, we noticed a tendency for students in detracked classrooms to seat themselves in racially segregated groups, staying close by students with similar academic levels, and among peers from the same racial background. The result of such patterns may be that although the classroom is ostensibly integrated, through choices about seating or other grouping arrangements, the classrooms have been re-segregated from within.

While observing student seating in two detracked classes over the course of an academic year, different patterns emerged when students chose their seats as compared to when their seats were assigned (Rubin, 2003a, 2003b). When students were allowed to choose their seats, they clustered in “segregated clumps.” When seated in such clumps, lower achieving students tended to volunteer less, spend more time on non-academic pursuits, such as talking, note-passing, eating, and putting on make-up. They also received more negative attention from the teacher and became identified by their peers as the kids who “don’t want to work.” Such students tended to be avoided as partners for group work and peer editing. In contrast, in classrooms where teachers deliberately mixed students in seating arrangements, students appeared to be less aware of who the high, medium, or low achievers were, and were more likely to work across these differences.

Academic Dilemmas

The Drift to the "Middle." Teachers of detracked classes struggle with how to teach and assess students with a wide range of academic skills. One strategy many teachers used to cope with the difficulties of teaching students with a range of skills was what one teacher referred to as "teaching to the middle"—creating a curriculum and using instructional methods aimed at a "mid-range" group of students rather than considering the specific needs of the students in the class. In teaching to the middle, materials, assignments, and assessment strategies are not created to develop the skills and conceptual understanding of students with particular needs but rather, all students are expected to adapt to this mid-range curriculum. The result of such an approach can be boredom for those students who are not sufficiently challenged, and frustration on the part of those who are overwhelmed by new material and approaches.

When teachers strive to maintain academic rigor in detracked classrooms, finding a way to insure that the needs of low achieving students are also met is no small challenge. In classes we have observed, some students lack basic skills and as a result experience difficulty in keeping up with course requirements. For example, in one class students were required to read several novels over the course of a semester, many of which were quite challenging. However, the teacher had not devised strategies to insure that low achievers understood what they were reading, and consequently, many of these students fell further and further behind as the year progressed. Administrators who advocate detracking need to keep in mind that differentiating instruction and the assessments that are used to monitor learning will require considerably more time and work for teachers. Ideally, this point should be considered and discussed openly before detracking plans are implemented.

Re-tracking: Perpetuating Inequalities within the Detracked classroom. Without adequate training or opportunities to reflect with other teachers who are confronted with similar challenges, we have noticed that some teachers end up "re-tracking" their students in a variety of ways. For example, we observed teachers assign high achieving students complex writing assignments, while low achievers were allowed to submit a less demanding project such as artwork related to the subject matter. Differences in work quality could inspire differences in the quality of feedback from teachers. One teacher of a detracked ninth grade English class agonized over this issue, reflecting that in the journals he assigned to his students, he found it was easier to connect more personally with his high achieving students who had stronger writing skills and therefore expressed themselves in greater detail than with his low achievers who produced much less. He noted that while some students wrote long, chatty, personal letters that engaged and entertained

him, others penned perfunctory plot summaries that did not inspire him to go beyond telling them "you need to write more." Though he felt that the differences in his responses were in some respect "discriminatory," he felt at a loss for how he could respond differently.

At times instructional methods touted as appropriate or exemplary strategies for heterogeneous classrooms resulted in the same inequalities of learning and instruction that detracking was implemented to challenge (Rubin, 2003c). Favorite strategies for detracking, according to teachers surveyed at one school, included using a multicultural curriculum, creating activities around the concept of "multiple intelligences," and using group work. These methods are frequently recommended as appropriate for heterogeneous classes (Cohen & Lotan, 1997; Shulman, 1998; Wheelock, 1992). Although such strategies can be effective in detracked classes, they do not guarantee success for all students, and must be implemented thoughtfully and monitored closely. In our observations we saw that students could become "re-tracked" in such activities, which can lend themselves to a more open-ended, loosely organized structure in which levels of participation may depend upon student initiative. Such strategies potentially showcase the academic skills of high achieving students without addressing the specific needs of lower achieving students.

We saw that activities based upon "multiple intelligences" theories could have unintended consequences. Such activities are designed to allow students with strengths in different areas—art, public speaking, writing, for example—to excel using approaches that match their talents and strengths. Often coupled with group work, the multiple intelligences approach posits that students will learn from each other and learn to respect and value each other's talents by contributing to a collective project. For example, Rubin observed an activity in which students were to prepare for a press conference between historical characters. To carry out the assignment one student was to play the role of "historian," responsible for conducting background research on the group's character. Another student was assigned to be the "reporter" and charged with researching the other groups' characters and creating interview questions. A third was the "actor," told to take direction from the historian in order to portray the character. The fourth group member was assigned the role of "artist," asked to create a visual symbol for the group's character. Such an activity is carefully constructed to allow for a variety of approaches to understanding the material at hand.

Yet, although this type of project is certainly innovative and appears egalitarian, students do not see all of the roles as equal. As one teacher remarked in an interview,

Even if it's heterogeneous groups and even if it's based on multiple abilities, if there's still a sense that the status of certain tasks or functions within a group are more

important than others then it doesn't really end up working very well. . . it's hard to undo the sense that the smart kids are the ones who can write well and read well.

In too many classrooms that we have observed there is a tendency for such activities to reinforce students' notions of who is smart and who is not, inadvertently perpetuating students' preconceptions about ability and intelligence rather than challenging them. As this same teacher noted, some of his wealthy white students "have this attitude that kids of color in the class are the ones who don't get it and are disruptive and in a lot of cases stand in the way of these really important goals they have."

When such attitudes are present in a classroom it can lead to conflict within groups and to a tendency to assign less academic roles and tasks to lower achieving students within a group work situation. While it is important to value a multiplicity of talents, those students who get to practice their research and writing skills (the historian and the reporter, for example) are devoting more time to honing the skills that are most valuable in the school setting. "Actors" and "artists," often those students most in need of time spent on high level reading and writing tasks, may end up spending less time than their higher achieving peers developing these critical competencies.

Recommended pedagogies for detracked classrooms have the potential to be effective, but if not implemented carefully can backfire, thus reinforcing old patterns and undermining the advantages of detracking. In our observations we often found those students who would do well in a tracked setting continuing to excel in the detracked class, accumulating praise and attention, building skills, and earning high grades. Conversely, we noticed that many lower achieving students continued to receive less or negative attention from the teacher, devoted less class time to reading and writing activities, and earned low grades within the very setting that was created to enhance their academic opportunities.

DETRACKING POSSIBILITIES

Detracking is clearly a complex reform based upon admirable values and ideals, but if the teaching and learning dilemmas we have described are not addressed it is likely to fail in reaching its potential. When done successfully, detracking can have powerful results, especially in terms of helping students to redefine their sense of what they can do academically and in terms of the opportunities that are available to them in school and beyond. In these final pages, we explore student awareness of the values and goals associated with detracking and discuss these in relation to how detracking should be implemented in schools and classrooms.

A Stand Against Racism

Students in many of the schools in which we conducted research and observed were aware of the racial and socioeconomic aspects of tracking. When asked about detracking as opposed to tracking, students from all racial and socioeconomic backgrounds expressed the view that detracking seemed to be a more fair way to organize students for learning. Many students noted that tracking separated students by race, and that students who were put in lower tracks had fewer opportunities available to them. As one student, a multiracial ninth grade boy, reflected in an interview:

When they were tracking, a lot of the colored kids would be, it seems, like, in a lower track. All the White kids and everything would be in higher tracking. I think you should get the same education no matter who you are.

Another student, an African American girl, noted, "Tracking has a lot to do with race. Like in my pre-algebra class, it's all Black kids in there. The higher English class, that class might have like one or two Black people in there." Although some students expressed concern that the detracked setting might be difficult for students who had not been educated as well as their peers in their earlier school years, many felt that detracking was the positive embodiment of a stand against racism on the part of their school.

While we applaud a principled stand against racism and unfair treatment of students, we also think it is important to keep in mind that students who are behind academically still need support to develop their skills. If high achieving students in detracked classes do not perceive students of color to be as smart or as competent, placing them together may merely reinforce racial stereotypes rather than counter them. Moreover, if detracking merely results in classrooms that are re-segregated, as was described earlier, then the high minded goal of countering racism will not be realized. This said, the beneficial effects of an anti-racist institutional stance can be powerful for all students and teachers in the school.

Expanded Possibilities for Students

For certain students, participation in a detracked classroom clearly expanded their social and academic possibilities in exciting ways. Detracking can reduce the difficult choices faced by high achieving students of color in schools that are academically and socially polarized by race. These students can face daily conflicts over whether to associate with higher achieving peers, who tend to be white students in higher tracks, or their peers of color, often placed in low academic tracks (Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002). In Rubin's (2003b) study of detracking in a racially and socioeconomically diverse

urban high school, a group of high achieving, academically skilled African American students observed over the course of an academic year were challenged and stimulated in their detracked English and social studies classes. Detracking, for these students, meant they no longer faced this choice between academic and social success, and, instead could excel in a heterogeneous setting.

Democratized Schools and Classrooms

At their best, detracked classrooms can be the laboratories for democracy envisioned by Dewey (1916), where students are encouraged to probe issues related to power in society at an abstract, philosophical level. We witnessed this in a student-run seminar on Rudyard Kipling's (1899) "The White Man's Burden," part of a unit on European imperialism in a ninth grade World History class in a large urban high school. The students in this racially integrated, detracked classroom held a rich and complex conversation about this difficult text without avoiding the controversial issues. In contrast to another discussion we observed in a class of predominantly White students at the same school, the discussion in the integrated group foregrounded race as a topic of analysis, with students drawing upon both personal experience and historical knowledge to pursue an in-depth analysis of the poem. In the discussion, students brought meaning to historical concepts such as "paternalism" and "imperialism," while tying these themes to current social justice issues. In contrast, the seminar on the same reading in the non-integrated setting was dull and stilted, with students avoiding mention of the issues of race and power at the very heart of the poem.

In another activity, a classroom enactment of an assembly line designed to stimulate discussion on the implications of the industrial revolution, the diversity of the detracked class seemed to increase the exchange of divergent views that is critical to the development of higher order cognitive skills and the education of citizens in a democratic society (Parker, 1996). One exchange between students in this class is illustrative of this potential. "When you work in an assembly line it's easy because you don't have to think," commented a white boy. "What do you mean you don't have to think?" challenged an African American girl. "Being on an assembly line doesn't involve *hard* thinking," countered a white girl. Another African American girl responded, "For some people it does. You have *no* idea what kind of thinking some people do." This exchange of perspectives may not have taken place in a more homogeneous setting.

These are two examples of how detracked classrooms can come to be desegregated spaces of the sort described by Fine, Weis, and Powell (1997) as places where "dif-

ferences are self-consciously drawn upon to enrich and texture the community; where negotiations of difference lie at the heart of the community; and where democratic participation is a defining aspect of decision making and daily life within the community" (p. 252). In challenging each other to examine new viewpoints these students embodied the ideals of education for democracy, an ideal that would be much more difficult to realize in a racially and socioeconomically homogeneous classroom setting.

BEST PRACTICES

The best practices, drawn from our observations and from studies published by other researchers, focus on strategies to provide support for previously underserved students, ways of promoting cultural change within the classroom and school, and suggestions for institutional restructuring to bolster detracking efforts.

Attention to the Academic Development of Previously Underserved Students

Lisa Delpit (1988) argues that white teachers often ignore power relations and imbalances that exist in the classroom and play out in society. She suggests that teachers do their students a disservice when they neglect to instruct poor students and students of color in the "culture and language of power"—the codes of language and behavior that they will need to succeed. Middle-class students already generally acquire this culture and language in their homes, she argues. They do not need direct instruction in these codes, and are therefore able to perform better in school where the codes and norms are operative. Schools, Delpit holds, need to explicitly teach what middle-class students get at home by incorporating explicit instruction in the culture and language of power into the detracked classroom. By doing so, they help to demystify schooling for students who grow up in non-dominant communities.

Beyond the culture and language of power, the level of academic work in the detracked classroom can present a challenge to students who are less adept at reading and writing than their peers. 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 that aim at bringing students of color into honors and advanced placement courses by providing them with complimentary support (Mehan, Hubbard, Villanueva, & Lintz 1996). In

order to insure the success of detracking, it is critically important that lower achieving students be given the support they need to reach higher expectations, or these students will not be able to access the new learning opportunities provided by more demanding courses.

We also observed that previously underserved students excelled in activities that called upon students to display a variety of forms of cultural capital and cultural knowledge. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), in her study of effective teachers of African American students, found that teachers who employed a variety of culturally relevant practices were more successful with African American students and produced higher levels of achievement. These teachers helped students who were on the fringes become the intellectual leaders of the class and built an inclusive learning community in the classroom. Such teachers accomplish this by including students' real life experiences within the curriculum, and incorporating both literature and oratory into literacy activities. In many of the detracked classrooms we observed, we noticed that when students' knowledge and skills were drawn upon, previously quiet and disengaged students became active participants in the class.

We also noticed that teachers had a more even distribution of success for students in their detracked classes when they created situations in which poor students and students of color were empowered to participate, critique, and analyze their own situations and life circumstances. Mehan et al. (1994), Collatos and Morrell (2003), and Keiser and Stein (2003) provide examples of how teaching students skills of critique and democratic participation empowers them within integrated settings. Carol Lee (2000) found in her own research that teachers can use various forms of scaffolding to enable students to grasp complex concepts in language arts classrooms without sacrificing engagement with higher order thinking skills.

Cultural Change within the Classroom

Careful manipulation of seating within the classroom was often an effective method of drawing more students into academic participation in the detracked classrooms we observed. When a teacher thought carefully about how he or she seated kids, what types of participation were required, and small group composition, participation and on-task behavior was greater among all students. During activities in which friends were separated from each other, students no longer had the temptation to talk with each other instead of taking part in the discussion, and wider participation was the result. In classrooms where seats were assigned, there seemed to be less disruptive behavior from students who would have been tracked low, and less evidence of non-engagement on the part of these students. In these classrooms students were more likely to help each other with assignments, and

more likely to receive positive attention and reinforcement from the teacher. Interviews with students in these classrooms also revealed that fewer students gained reputations from peers and teachers as "bad students" or people "who do not do their work."

Building social relationships between students who do not know each other well is helpful for the functioning of a detracked class (Rubin, 2003c). If detracking is to realize its goals, then students must extend their social relationships beyond those prevailing in the larger school context. Ninth grade students are good targets for adult intervention in their emerging social relationships, as they are struggling to find a place for themselves in an unfamiliar territory. Teachers can create activities to build social relationships among students, such as intentionally scrambling groups for less academic activities, and leading activities that call upon different types of knowledge and skills. Larger changes in the school structure, which will be discussed below, can address this issue as well.

Changes in School Structure and Redistribution of Institutional Resources

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 insuring that detracked classes are smaller and therefore able to provide more personalized support for students. It also is 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 also may need the opportunity to meet regularly as a group, to observe each other teaching, and to share and analyze student work so that they can support each other in meeting the academic goals of this reform.

CONCLUSION

The main question some will ask is whether all of the potential pitfalls we have identified mean that we should stick with "the devil we know": tracked schools and classrooms that are implicated in growing educational inequities. This is not our conclusion. In detracked classrooms, we have seen students who otherwise would have been consigned to dull classes filled with rote skills

work become full participants in a more challenging and meaningful curriculum. When taught by talented teachers, we have seen diverse groups of students learn from each other in highly significant ways while their peers in tracked, segregated classes remain comfortably unchallenged, both socially and intellectually.

Detracking need not be regarded as a reform doomed to fail, but neither is it an easy solution to the problems of tracking. Best practices for detracking classrooms such as simulations, Socratic seminars, and project-based learning, require careful and sensitive planning on the part of teachers, alongside professional development, and additional resources from administrators. Put more simply, it is not enough to “just take them out of those tracks.”

From research and experience we have found that successful detracking practices must operate on a number of levels. Jeannie Oakes (Oakes et al., 1997) writes of a cultural change necessary for successful detracking, a change in teachers’ attitudes about ability. This, she writes, is more important than the technical changes of curriculum or instruction. While we agree with her on the importance of this cultural change in the norms, expectations, and values that are operative within a school, we have found that the curriculum and instruction that she labels technical is equally implicated in the success or failure of the reform. Instructional practices and curricular choices shape students’ classroom experiences on a daily basis, and are a critical part of any detracking effort. Students need careful attention to skills development so they can take advantage of higher-level curriculum and not be overwhelmed or left behind. Successful detracking practices merge the cultural, instructional, and political, and engage students in interesting work while paying attention to academic skills and the complexities of interpersonal dynamics among students.

Further research needs to be done to provide direction on these issues. Research can help us determine the kinds of skills and preparation teachers need to teach heterogeneous classes, and to identify pedagogical practices that allow students of varying abilities to access a rich and rigorous curriculum. Studies are needed to determine what organizational and structural supports (for example, class size, supplemental tutoring) increase the likelihood that detracking efforts will succeed. Additionally, honest and informed discussion must take place over the issue of whether some subject areas (for example, math and science) are too complex and dependent on previous preparation for detracking. Research can be done to inform how we prepare students for and talk to them about the experience of being in a detracked classroom. What kinds of social awareness and social skills might they need to make the experience a good one? Finally, detracking must be examined in varied school settings in order to understand how the enactment of the reform might vary by context.

A close look at detracking challenges us to go beyond the superficial in our attempts at increasing equity in our schools. Just as we have learned from desegregation efforts that successful integration requires more than just putting kids from different racial and ethnic backgrounds together in the same school (Metz, 1978; Peshkin, 1991), putting students with different levels of ability and/or preparation together in the same classroom is a beginning—not an end in itself. The reason that tracking continues to be practiced throughout the United States despite the powerful critiques that have been written is that it is tied to larger social inequities and racial injustice. Pressures exerted by these larger social forces can easily undermine detracking and other equity efforts. A detracked classroom can swiftly become re-tracked from within unless substantial support is provided for previously underserved students. Similarly, schools that dare to detrack their students and their classrooms must recognize at the outset that those who have benefited in the past from tracking are likely to oppose them (Wells & Serna, 1996). If they are unable to defend detracking by assuring parents and teachers that the educational goals are sound and that it is in fact possible to balance equity and excellence (Noguera, 2001), they will undoubtedly succumb to the fallout that will result from angered parents and frustrated teachers.

NOTE

1. Because this article’s conclusions are drawn from our collective reflections, there is no consistent data gathering methodology. Presentation of data in this article is primarily intended to highlight and illustrate our points, rather than to prove them empirically. For descriptions of Rubin’s systematic research conducted on detracking see Rubin (2003b) and Rubin (2003c).

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