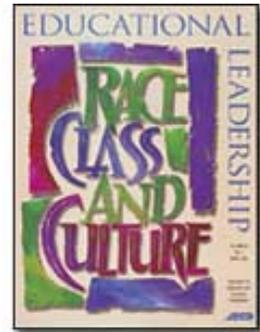




## Will Tracking Reform Promote Social Equity?

**Although supporters of detracking believe that it leads to greater social equity, we must carefully examine the research, which suggests that tracking reform has potential dangers.**



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Can schools support a more equitable distribution of academic achievement by reducing or eliminating tracking? Do low-income students and students of color benefit from detracking? Prominent researchers and prestigious national reports have argued that tracking stands in the way of equal educational opportunity (Oakes, 1985; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Wheelock, 1992; Braddock & Slavin, 1993). Across the country, several states—California, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, and Nevada—have followed suit by urging, in the name of equity, that middle and high schools move away from tracking and begin grouping students of varying abilities into the same academic classes.

Despite the passionate advocacy for and against this recommendation, the relevant research is ambiguous. With more than 700 studies of tracking in existence, no convincing evidence suggests that tracking has a special, adverse effect on the achievement of African American, Latino, or disadvantaged students. Nor does research show that these students achieve at higher levels in untracked settings (Loveless, 1998; Ferguson, 1998).

### Research Findings

The strongest argument for detracking is an indirect one. A few high-quality studies indicate that tracking exacerbates achievement differences by depressing the achievement of students in low tracks and boosting the achievement of students in high tracks (Kerckhoff, 1986; Gamoran, 1987). The most striking finding is from Adam Gamoran's 1987 analysis of a large national data set assembled in the early 1980s, "High School and Beyond." He discovered that the achievement gap between low- and high-track students is greater than the gap between high school dropouts and students who persist in school to graduation. Low-income students and students of color are disproportionately represented in low tracks. They therefore bear a disproportionate share of the low-track disadvantage, logic follows, and would be the primary beneficiaries from detracking (Oakes, 1985; Oakes, 1990).

The validity of this causal sequence is by no means settled. Indeed, the same logic can be used to justify tracking. Because the widening achievement gap contains at least one positive aspect—gains by high-track students—schools could try to maintain the benefit that tracking brings to high-ability students while launching a concerted campaign to make low tracks more rigorous. Moreover, Gamoran and Mare (1989) conducted another analysis of national data showing that the probability of being assigned to a high track is 10 percent greater for black students than for white students. If true, then black achievement may actually suffer from tracking's abolition. <sup>1</sup>

The bottom line is that we must exercise caution in gleaning policy guidance from tracking research. Empirical evidence has yet to verify detracking's benefits. Until we have carefully studied a significant number of untracked schools, we can only speculate about their effect on achievement gaps between various groups of students.

Let's set aside these issues for a moment and assume that the critics are right about a crucial point, that tracking exacerbates achievement differences between high and low achievers. Assume also that tracking's abolition will narrow the gap between students who otherwise would have been in high and low tracks. Is this enough to conclude that widespread tracking reform will promote social equity—that it will help poor, black, and Hispanic students?

Not necessarily. Recent research has uncovered four potential effects of detracking that are counterproductive to achievement. In addition, recently discovered patterns in the reform's implementation—notably, the kinds of schools that are embracing or resisting detracking—threaten to exacerbate rather than ameliorate race and class inequities.

## **Detracking's Losers**

One way to narrow the gap between high and low achievers is to boost low-ability students' learning while either holding steady or lowering everyone else's. A study by Argys, Rees, and Brewer suggests that detracking works in precisely this manner. The analysis focused on 10th graders in the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS) sample. When assigned to heterogeneous math classes rather than to low tracks, low-ability 10th graders gained about 5 percentage points on achievement tests. Detracking helped them. Average students, in contrast, lost 2 percentage points from detracking, and high-ability students lost even more, about 5 points (Argys, Rees, & Brewer, 1996). The achievement gap was indeed narrowed, but apparently at the expense of students in regular and high tracks, representing about 70 percent of 10th graders in the United States. Overall, achievement was approximately 2 percentage points lower in detracked schools.

These findings should give tracking reformers pause. African American, Latino, and disadvantaged students are indeed disproportionately assigned to low tracks. But if the Argys finding is accurate, high- and average-track students of all racial and economic backgrounds lose out under heterogeneous grouping. Do we further the cause of equity by lowering the achievement of minority students and students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are assigned to and excelling in high and average tracks?

## **Bright Flight**

In schools where detracking is controversial, the parents of high-ability students often lobby vigorously against the reform. They may be rationally defending honors classes that help their children, but some analysts detect racism or other bigoted motives (Wells & Serna, 1996; Kohn, 1998). Parents counter that they want their children to be adequately challenged and that they aren't obliged to sacrifice their children's education for an ideological agenda or an unproven educational theory (Rochester, 1998). These parents either flee or threaten to flee schools that are abolishing honors courses: hence, the *bright flight* phenomenon.

Bright flight's impact on schools is fundamentally the same regardless of motive. High-achieving students are a resource that schools cannot afford to squander. High achievers raise schools' test scores; act as role models for other students; and enhance schools' reputations as places of study, thinking, and learning. Moreover, polling data indicate that parents' unwillingness to embrace heterogeneous grouping isn't fueled by racial animus. Research by the Public Agenda Foundation shows that black parents distrust mixed-ability classes as much as white parents do (1994). It's difficult to imagine how any school can benefit by alienating and driving out its best students. In schools where academic achievement is already well below national norms, the effect of bright flight may be truly devastating.

## **Algebra**

Research is unclear on whether tracking's effects vary by subject area. Several studies note that math teachers are resistant to tracking reform (Loveless, 1994; Gamoran & Weinstein, 1998). The middle and high school math curriculum is usually organized hierarchically, with progress through courses predicated on successful completion of prerequisites. Even within a particular math course, topics build upon one another so that students acquire knowledge sequentially. As a consequence, math teachers are intuitively skeptical of assigning students who can't do basic arithmetic to the same classes as students ready to solve complex algebra problems.

This intuition may be on the mark. Researchers at Johns Hopkins University analyzed NELS data to find out what happened to the math achievement of 8th graders who were grouped in different ways (Epstein & MacIver, 1992). Students in heterogeneously grouped algebra classes didn't learn as much as students in tracked algebra classes. This held true for all ability levels—high, average, and low. In contrast, when survey courses in math were heterogeneously grouped, low-ability students benefitted. Tracking apparently doesn't affect all math courses identically. This finding assumes added importance as the idea of all students taking an algebra course at an earlier age gains popularity. If the finding is valid, then tracking reform may seriously diminish the prospect that universal 8th grade algebra will boost U.S. math achievement.

## **Status Distinctions**

Detracking is a reform associated with egalitarianism. At the extreme, reformers hoisting the flag of egalitarianism seek to eliminate many traditional distinctions that schools make among students, abolishing advanced placement courses and report cards with letter grades, for

example, or abandoning class rankings, honor rolls, or the recognition of valedictorians at graduation exercises. Egalitarians are offended that these practices publicly proclaim some knowledge intrinsically more valuable than other knowledge and some youngsters better students than other youngsters.

Extreme egalitarians deplore tracking. They argue that labeling courses *honors*, *college prep*, *regular*, and *remedial* creates indelible status distinctions, publicly separating students into groups of winners and losers. Adding to the unfairness, low-track students are stigmatized, whereas high-track students receive esteem irrespective of their actual performance in class. When these status distinctions correspond to race and class differences in track assignments, critics charge, an ugly element of segregation and exclusion is introduced into the school's social milieu.

What do we know about these assertions? First, evidence is thin that tracking depresses the self-esteem of low-achieving students. James Kulik's meta-analysis of studies on the question actually found a slightly positive effect, albeit statistically insignificant, of tracking on low-achieving students' self-esteem (Kulik, 1992). The mixed-ability classrooms that result from detracking may force low achievers into daily comparisons with their more able peers, conditions hostile to the development of self-confidence. Considering the disproportionate percentage of low achievers who are either minority students or from low-income families, this detracking would redound to the detriment of equity.

A second and potentially more profound problem is the flip side of the stigma argument. Yes, tracking differentially allots status. But we have also known for some time that academic accomplishments compete rather poorly with other status rankings among high school students (Coleman, 1961). When it comes to winning the approval of teenagers, academic success vies with athletic prowess, good looks, knowledge of the latest fashion trends, and even the acting out of antischool sentiments (Bishop, 1989; Steinberg, 1996).

Detracking is often part of a package of reforms that eradicates a series of institutional statements about what is worthy—that curriculum can be differentiated by its complexity and challenge, that one's ticket to college is punched by mastery of a particular body of knowledge, that being a good student is an achievement that schools cherish and hold in high esteem. A strain of egalitarianism believes that all status rankings are evil. But wholly compatible with equity is the notion that status distinctions are a good thing as long as they are awarded fairly and for the right accomplishments.

Consider social equity in this light. Wealthy parents whose children don't receive the right signals in school will probably find and purchase this guidance elsewhere. Parents who attended college themselves will steer their children toward acquiring the knowledge essential for entry to higher education. Other children won't fare so well. If the institutional signposts for academic status are brought down—and a differentiated curriculum is only one of many in education—children from low-income households or with parents who didn't attend college will surely pay the price. And that price will escalate if they attend high schools where advanced placement courses, in the name of equity, have been abolished so that all students can be

assigned to generically labeled, untracked classes.

## **Tracked and Untracked Schools**

Even if detracked schools succeed in narrowing the achievement gap between formerly high- and low-track students—and I'm not convinced that they will—these four potential dangers threaten to overwhelm any advantage such a narrowing would represent.

I recently completed a study of tracking reform that raises an additional concern, one pertaining to the characteristics of tracked and untracked schools. At the beginning of the decade, I wondered what effect the detracking movement was having on schools. I wondered what kinds of schools were detracking and what kinds of schools were resisting the reform. From 1990 to 1997, I surveyed middle schools in two states, California and Massachusetts. Both states had earlier condemned tracking for being unfair to poor and minority students and had urged middle schools to reduce or abandon tracking's use. In addition to conducting the surveys, I visited 29 school sites and interviewed more than 250 teachers and principals (Loveless, 1999).

The schools that accepted this recommendation are starkly different from the schools that rejected it. Urban schools, low-achieving schools, and schools with predominantly low-income populations have supported the reform. Although few of these schools have completely detracked, they extensively use heterogeneous grouping in academic courses and exhibit far less ability grouping than at the beginning of the decade. In sharp contrast, high-achieving suburban schools and schools in middle-class or wealthy communities have given the recommendation a cold shoulder. They are more likely to offer tracked academic classes and eschew heterogeneous grouping.

What's wrong with this? Nothing, if the best wishes and good intentions of state policymakers turn out to be true. But as a colleague, Paul Peterson (1998), pointed out, high hopes and good intentions are rarely in short supply in public policy. They are never sufficient to get bad policy to yield good results. The evidence that tracking reform boosts achievement is thin. Detracking entails risks. Some of society's most troubled schools are shouldering these risks. If detracking produces bad results, already beleaguered schools will suffer the consequences, and suburban and urban schools will diverge even more in their practices. Local educators in California and Massachusetts can't be blamed for these events. State officials, after all, urged them to detrack, and state policy specifically recommends detracking as a means of achieving greater educational equity.

## **Looking Ahead**

The wisdom of tracking reform is an open question. If the beliefs of detracking advocates are borne out, poorly performing schools will experience marked improvement. If the problems identified here surface in reformed schools, educators will see detracking as a mistake.

My closing comments, then, address future research on this reform. We need research of the highest caliber to adjudicate the competing claims in the tracking debate. Studies with random assignment of students to tracked and untracked schools would significantly enhance the

quality of evidence on the issue. Designers of large-scale longitudinal surveys should scrutinize their measures of school policies to make sure that they accurately capture the intricacies of tracking. There are gradations to curriculum differentiation, ways that schools can do one thing while saying that they are doing something else, and a litany of other subtleties in schools' grouping practices.

Finally, we must get beyond the current ideological gridlock of the tracking debate, identifying those issues that can be clarified by empirical evidence and those that cannot. The question explored here, whether tracking reform promotes equity in academic achievement, is amenable to empirical research—if we have the courage, that is, to submit our assumptions about tracking and detracking to rigorous, impartial tests. Believing that detracking will positively affect social equity is a reasonable hypothesis. But we must take seriously an alternative hypothesis, that tracking reform will worsen the problems that it is intending to solve.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Lucas and Gamoran (1993) found that the 10 percent advantage is largely an artifact of African Americans attending schools where mean achievement is lower, thereby lowering the requirements for high-track membership. If all high-track students stand to lose from detracking, however, this finding doesn't alter the conclusion that these students will be adversely affected. Kulik (1992) reports a +.87 effect size for gifted students in special classes with an accelerated curriculum. If the achievement of gifted African American students were to drop by this much as a result of abolishing advanced placement courses, it represents a loss more than twice as large as the current black-white test score gap in NAEP.

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