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THE TRUTH ABOUT TRACKING

Lauren Anderson and Jeannie Oakes

Tracking practices—labeling students according to their perceived competencies and deficits and placing them in classes and programs accordingly—are among the most entrenched in American education. People rarely question them and often assume that they represent the most effective, efficient, and equitable methods for organizing students, delivering instruction, and ensuring that youth achieve to their highest capabilities. In reality, however, tracking does far more harm than good.

In this chapter, we debunk some of the key myths about tracking's effectiveness, efficiency, and relationship to equity, and we present some alternative approaches for ensuring that students' needs are met. We begin by addressing how and why schools track students and the implications for students' opportunities to learn. We then review some of the evidence showing that tracking practices often do as much to *create* differences and *perpetuate* inequities as they do to support students in reaching their full potential. Finally, we briefly address the efforts of those who are avoiding or striving to undo tracking and implementing in its place more multidimensional, developmental, and socially just practices.

The Foundation on Which Tracking Rests: Labeling, Sorting, and Grouping

For as long as schools have existed in the United States, educators have used assessment and evaluation strategies to compare, rank, and assign relative value to students' abilities and achievements. Students have been labeled slow, incompetent, gifted, high achieving, below average, learning disabled, limited English proficient, and more. Such labels have long shaped how students are sorted into instructional groups, classes, and programs (Fass, 1991; Lucas, 1999; Oakes, 2005; Spring, 2007; Tyack, 1974).

Today, "ability level," previous achievement, postsecondary aspirations, English-language proficiency, and disability status have become almost taken-for-granted or "common-sense" criteria used for grouping students. Other loaded criteria—"individual effort," "talent," "motivation," and completion of various prerequisites, among others—are also used when placing students in "appropriate" groups, classes, and programs. While specifics vary from school to school, ultimately nearly all grouping assignments are made and justified by schools' predictions about students' (relative) *capacity* to succeed in any given group. While stated intentions emphasize placing students in or encouraging students to take the most demanding courses in which the school thinks they can succeed, these predictions have always been fraught with inconsistency and are often just plain wrong (Burris, Heubert, & Levin, 2006; Oakes, 2005). The experience of Kimberly Aragon, an eighth-grade humanities teacher, for example, is telling.

> Grouping pervades almost every area of my K–8 school. Some students enter a "VISTA" (gifted according to various intelligences) program as early as second grade, and, as those students progress, there will be at least one VISTA class in every grade. Every grade, 2 to 8, also has what is called a "SHARP" class. SHARP is an acronym for "Students with High Achievement in Reading Program." Students are placed in a SHARP class based on their previous years' test scores and their grades in English. Although the rest of the students at my school are not labeled as "DULL," the implication of the "SHARP" name is obvious. . . . Moreover, some grades are divided further by placing the Limited English Proficient (LEP) students in one class and all of the rest of the students in another class. . . . The school [has also] instituted a middle-school reading elective, which requires 10 students who scored in the bottom quartile on the previous year's standardized test to receive extra reading instruction. . . . Those students are then not able to participate in the other electives offered, such as drama, Spanish, communications, art, and computers.[1]

Of course, there's nothing inherently wrong with teachers grouping students in order to provide targeted instruction or tailored scaffolding so that students can access the content they are expected to learn. The problem comes, as Kimberly describes, when grouping determinations are made using narrow indicators of students' "ability" and when the actions based on those determinations separate students, restrict access to the curriculum, and create public and enduring hierarchies that classify some as having more or less ability and potential than others.

What Is Tracking, and What Does It Involve?

Tracking refers to the routine sorting of students into so-called homogeneous groups and classes of "high," "average," and "low" ability, achievement, or potential (or any of the creative euphemisms in vogue, such as "advanced," "accelerated,"

"opportunity," "basic," "SHARP," or "VISTA"). Such sorting typically begins early in elementary school—sometimes even in kindergarten—and it continues throughout the gradespan.[2]

Many elementary schools provide separate classes so that students spend the entire day with peers judged to be at the same "ability level." Others group students by "ability" for specific parts of the day or for specific subjects such as reading and math; still others offer evidently leveled instruction to small groups within individual classrooms. For example, schools often maintain programs that group the highest-achieving students for enrichment or accelerated instruction in separate classes, in pull-out programs, or in "gifted" clusters within regular classrooms.

Nearly all middle schools and high schools group students for at least some academic subjects (typically English, mathematics, and science and less commonly social studies) on the basis of "ability" as determined by past grades, test scores, and teacher recommendations (Oakes, 2005; Yonezawa, Wells & Serna, 2002). Analyses of national surveys suggest, for example, that for the past two decades roughly three-fourths of eighth graders have been assigned to math classes on the basis of "ability" (Loveless, 2013).

Traditionally, and not unrelated to judgments of "ability" and placement decisions made in elementary and middle grades, high schools have also prescribed different course sequences for students assumed to have different futures. For example, those expected to attend college and those expected to enter the workforce after high school have historically been placed into different tracks. In some secondary schools, this has meant assigning students to whole blocks of classes all at the same "ability level" or enrolling them in a pre-set program of study—whether college preparatory, general (noncollege), or vocational—that dictates their entire array of courses. While some schools are striving to elevate the rigor and status of general and vocational offerings by reimagining them as pathways to career *and* college preparation (Oakes & Saunders, 2008), traditional general or vocational tracks usually coincide with lower levels of academic challenge and include courses that don't satisfy college entrance requirements or promote a college-going culture. Thus, students' expected futures shape their track placements, which in turn shape the actual futures to which they gain access.

Even *within* college-prep tracks, different course sequences emerge—some designed to prepare students for highly competitive universities, some for less competitive ones, and some for two-year community colleges. Most high schools, for example, offer advanced placement (AP) classes for high-achieving eleventh and twelfth graders. These courses open up opportunities for students to pursue college-level content and accrue college credits; many high schools also weight AP courses more heavily than others when calculating grade-point averages, thus further distinguishing students already privileged by the education system.

Policies affecting ability grouping and tracking have ebbed and flowed over the years, especially since the mid-1980s, when research began in earnest to document their ill effects and inequalities. Since then, many schools and scholars have

distinguished between ability grouping and tracking—defining the latter narrowly as a permanent, block assignment of students into courses that prepare them for different futures, such as entry into two- or four-year colleges, direct entry into the workforce, and so on. Because of the well-established problems—described in greater detail later—caused by placing students in different tracks, today's schools typically try to avoid tracking (even if only rhetorically) often while still favoring ability grouping. Again, while grouping students for instruction can be useful, even essential to ensuring that students' learning needs are met, this holds only if groups are flexible, temporary, and done within classes for particular assignments or lessons and do not attach status labels to students such as "fast," "remedial," and so forth. Unfortunately, what some schools call ability grouping often amounts to tracking under a more acceptable name.

There is some evidence that worrisome practices and the perspectives and policies that support them are on the rise. In the early part of 2013, a flurry of columns (e.g., Garelick, 2013; Welner, 2013) and news features (e.g., Garland, 2013; Sparks, 2013; Yee, 2013) addressed the topic, some coming in response to reports that teachers in recent years were relying more on grouping students by "ability" than they had a decade or two ago (Loveless, 2013). Around the same time, Texas passed a bill establishing a new tiered diploma system that involves enrolling some ninth graders in a track leading to a "distinguished" diploma, while others prepare for a "foundational" diploma (Texas H.B. 5, 2013, Welner & Burris, 2013a)—an approach that echoes those implemented and under consideration in other states. While it remains to be seen what these resurgent practices and new systems will yield, decades of research indicate the strong potential for such approaches to further imperil equity and opportunity (Welner, 2013; Welner & Burris, 2013b).

What Makes Tracking Inefficient, Ineffective, and Inequitable?

The conventional explanation for labeling and sorting students into separate classes and programs is that, once a school identifies educationally relevant differences, teachers can teach groups of students with meaningful similarities, and students will benefit from instruction in these groups. However, below this superficially sensible explanation are troubling cultural and historical patterns that connect school-level labeling and sorting to the social construction of race, class, and ability and the maintenance of competitive advantage for members of the dominant group.

Current policies demand, at least rhetorically, that schools educate every student to high academic standards, regardless of presumed intellectual ability, disability, social status, gender, or race, and that they prepare all high school graduates for both college and careers. It follows that today's tracking practices must be judged by whether they are helping teachers reach these goals. As we explain later, while today's tracking practices may enable success for a privileged few, they are not efficient or effective or equitable.

Tracking Relies on Faulty Assumptions of Homogeneity

The very idea of homogeneous grouping assumes that students in a given class are similar in notable ways. But even those assumed to be similar differ from one another in important ways and do not benefit from a learning environment that ignores those differences. Indeed, ample scholarship suggests that learning suffers when learners are presumed to be the same (e.g., Crawford, 2004; Engeström, 1999; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Lee, 2007; Nieto & Bode, 2011; Rogoff, 2003). Classes designed for specific ability, disability, and language "levels" are filled with students who display noteworthy differences in the readiness, interest, effort, and aptitude they bring to various tasks. Tracked schools—by virtue of their structure and the messages that structure sends—may draw attention away from such diversity, potentially discouraging teachers from attending to students' inevitable differences and/or from developing multidimensional lessons or instruction tailored to individual students' needs.

Furthermore, substantial evidence demonstrates that schools often disregard their own criteria—allowing, for example, parent preferences or student behavior to influence students' placements. In such situations especially, tracking practices—given their underlying assumptions and projected veneer of homogeneity—do more than mask difference; they actually miseducate teachers about the students who are assigned to their classes. As one ninth-grade mathematics teacher, Marilyn Cortez, discovered firsthand, many school systems designate classes for students of a particular ability or language level but then enroll students erroneously, even by their own standards (Burris, 2003; Mehan, Mercer, & Rueda, 2002; Welner, 2001; Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002).

> Placing students in the correct math class was something I assumed was done. . . . I found out over the course of the year that many students had been misplaced and were not aware of it. They knew the course name and number, but they did not know the type of content that would be covered. They just assumed that counselors placed them correctly. Misplaced students are also plentiful in my "sheltered" [English] class [designated for native Spanish speakers]. . . . I asked students individually whether they spoke Spanish fluently, and if so, whether they considered it their primary language. Three students! Only three students in my entire sheltered course considered Spanish their primary language, and only four others spoke it fluently.

Still other factors, some discussed later—including testing, parent activism, the school's master schedule, and more—make such assignments prone to error and unfairness.

Tracking Relies on Flawed Tests and Arbitrary Cutoffs

Schools risk enormous unfairness when they use test scores to sort students across courses and tracks. And yet they often rely on standardized testing, school

performance, or both to determine students' designated achievement levels. Depending on the situation—particularly in instances of exemplary or lagging achievement—IQ scores specifically factor into grouping determinations. For example, "gifted" students are generally identified as those meeting specific criteria, sometimes including IQ scores or other standardized measures.

Developed in the early twentieth century, IQ tests were considered by their advocates to be scientific, accurate, and impartial. In reality, as explained in Chapter 6, they were anything but; for example, questions selected for inclusion in the tests were those that socioeconomically privileged, White test takers would be much more likely to answer "correctly." As a result, IQ scores mostly served to legitimize preexisting ways of sorting, producing groups composed of students of similar family background, wealth, and race.

While today's schools rarely rely on IQ alone, these early practices established enduring placement patterns. Standardized achievement test scores often influence students' placement into "ability" groups, classes, and compensatory education programs. Standardized language-proficiency tests often determine placements for English learners. Both can be problematic, leading to seemingly arbitrary placements.

As well, states, districts, and schools differ widely in how they use test scores to define "high," "average," and "low" ability (Rubin, 2008); a student identified as belonging in any one category in one community might wind up in a different category somewhere else. Our own research found wide disparities in cut-off scores used by high schools to decide which students should be admitted to honors, regular, and lower-level classes (Oakes, 2005; Oakes & Guiton, 1995). For example, a student in a lower-performing high school may require a lower score on a standardized test to get into an honors class than a student in a higher-performing school. In addition, the same schools might apply different criteria in different years. These inconsistencies further exacerbate the arbitrary and unfair nature of tracking (Welner, 2001).

Tracking, by Definition, Means Separate and Unequal Tracks and Outcomes

Of course, the issue with tracking isn't just that placement occurs problematically but that also it tends to confer upon students significantly different learning opportunities, depending on their track assignments, and these differences accumulate over years spent in school to the extreme advantage of some and the extreme detriment of others. Some of the well-documented differences between high- and low-level classes are listed in table 9.1 (Oakes, 2005; Watanabe, 2008; Welner, 2001).

Simply put, in every aspect of what makes for a quality education, kids in lower tracks typically get less than those in higher tracks and gifted programs.[3] As a result, research shows that students placed at lower levels consistently achieve less than classmates with the same abilities who were placed at higher levels and

TABLE 9.1 Grouping-Related Differences in Learning Opportunities

Higher-Group Advantages	*Lower-Group Disadvantages*
Curriculum emphasizing concepts, inquiry, and problem-solving	Curriculum emphasizing low-level facts and skills
Emphasis on students developing as autonomous thinkers	Emphasis on teaching students to follow rules and procedures
More time spent on instruction	More time spent on discipline and socializing
More active and interactive learning activities	More worksheets and seatwork
Computers used as learning tools	Computers used as tutors or for worksheet completion and other low-level "busywork"
More qualified and experienced teachers	More uncertified and inexperienced teachers
Extra enrichment activities and resources	Few enrichment opportunities
More engaging and friendly classroom atmosphere	More alienating and hostile classroom atmosphere
"Hard work" a likely classroom norm	"Not working" a likely classroom norm

that students with both high *and* low test scores do better when they are in higher-level courses (Boaler, 2006; Burris et al., 2006; Hallinan, 2000; Oakes, 1995; Welner, 2001; Watanabe, 2008). In fact, the very conditions, resources, and instructional approaches typically prescribed (and reserved) for "gifted" students—including "thematic, broad-based, and integrative content," "concept-based instruction," and "open-ended questions that stimulate inquiry, active exploration, and discovery" (Berger, 1996)—are the same conditions, resources, and instructional approaches that have been shown to contribute to the success of *all* students, regardless of their so-called ability levels, when grouped together in heterogeneous classes (e.g., Boaler, 2006; Tomlinson, 1995, 2001; Watanabe, 2011). Interestingly enough, a commitment to heterogeneous grouping is also among the conditions characterizing Finland's education system and that of other countries so often lauded for high overall achievement levels and narrow achievement gaps (Oakes, 2008).

Tracking Restricts Access and Undermines Achievement

Most students placed in low-ability or even average groups in elementary school continue in these tracks in middle school. Senior high schools usually place these students in non-college-preparatory tracks or "lower-level" college-prep tracks that offer access to less-competitive colleges or majors, to two-year colleges, or to

remedial classes as college freshmen. For example, national survey data from the 1980s indicated that 60 to 70 percent of tenth graders in honors math were also enrolled in honors English; a similar degree of overlap existed between enrollment in remedial math and remedial or low-level English (Gamoran, 1988). And, in large part, these patterns endure (Oakes, 2005; Welner, 2001).

Since some subjects, such as math, follow a set sequence, students' assignments in earlier grades determine how far they can progress before graduation (Garet & DeLany, 1988; DeLany, 1991; Oakes, 2005). Students who end up in top math classes during high school are often identified by the sixth grade or before. Those not placed in top-track math classes by sixth grade often stand only the slimmest chance of completing calculus in high school. Because students' track placements rarely change, differences among students accumulate over time—in terms of what students experience, what they learn, how they see themselves and school, and what they expect for their futures—and become most obvious in high school, by which point they often seem natural, inevitable, and irreparable to students and educators alike. For example, by the time many students learn about colleges' expectations—the role of AP courses in gaining admission and course credit, the costs associated with having to enroll in remedial math, and so on—it often feels, and in many cases *is,* "too late" to adjust.

Certainly, there are exceptions. Many teachers know students who become inspired and transcend the labels assigned to them and/or the tracks to which they are assigned. Some manage, despite odds, to pull themselves out of low-track classes and into higher-track ones. However, exceptions occur in spite of tracking, not because of it, and those who do succeed against the odds often carry bitter memories of their struggle.

Tracking Miseducates Students about Their Own and One Another's Potential

Being in a low-level class or lower track most often fosters lower achievement, lower esteem (particularly concerning one's academic ability), lowered aspirations, negative attitudes toward self and/or school, and even dropping out (Fine, 1991; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992; Orfield, 2004; Werblow, Urick, & Duesbery, 2013). Consider, for example, the account shared by Michael Alvarez, a first-year ninth-grade English teacher:

> My students believe they are in classes for stupid people. They say things such as, "We can't do this. We're only '103' [low-ability class] students." . . .
>
> Many teachers [at my school] believe not only that low-track students will not do the work but that they cannot do the work. Any readings I assign for them to do at home I have to photocopy since they are not allowed their own books. There is only a class set because someone has decided that they will not do any homework anyway, and they will probably just lose the books. . . . Many of them tell me I am the only teacher that gives homework.

> During my first semester, I taught my English classes in the print shop. My next room turned out not to be a classroom at all. My students had nowhere to sit, and one of the kids said, "Mr. Alvarez, they always give you the cheap classrooms." She sure was right. Finally, with 10 weeks to go in the year, I moved into a [third] room . . . with one window that does not open, no air conditioner, and only one door to let in air. It has been close to 90 degrees every day.
>
> The students are being cheated out of a quality education. . . . I look at all the classes that have to endure this environment, and I see they all have one thing in common: they are lower-track classes. The four teachers who were in the print shop and now in the windowless bungalows for the most part have "103" students. . . . The school decided that the kids who need the most attention, the most help, should get the worst environment in which to learn. There is no way that the school would put honors kids in these rooms.

Accounts like these reveal how the distribution of resources and curricular differentiation can systematically shortchange students who are not in the uppermost track. And if the school and teachers "buy into" the idea that these students are "less able," then it's likely students will as well. The result is that not all students are seen as warranting similarly engaging learning experiences and opportunities—including access to teachers with reputations for being the most experienced and highly skilled (Oakes, 2005; Welner, 2001).

The labels that accompany grouping and tracking (even if masked in local codes such as "VISTA" or "103") often translate into lowered self-confidence and lowered expectations for all students not graced with the highest status label. Placement in a low, middle, or almost-but-not-quite-top class often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy—a cycle of lower expectations, fewer opportunities, and academic performance that usually matches (but does not exceed) expected performance levels (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Oakes, 2005). Though arguably not as detrimental to their development and academic self-concept, tracking also miseducates those placed into higher tracks, where they experience less diversity than they would in untracked classes, where they sometimes face counterproductive competiveness, and where they come to misunderstand their own success as merely reflecting merit (rather than being a by-product, at least in part, of structural privilege) (Yonezawa & Jones, 2006).

These labels and track assignments don't just impact students. Their effects permeate the cultures of our schools and communities. Thus, we hear references to "gifted parents." Teachers talk about "my low kids." Parents and educators alike confer greater status on teachers of higher-level classes. For example, at public meetings, a teacher may identify herself as an AP calculus teacher rather than a teacher of basic math, even if she teaches both. While teachers of low-track classes may be admired for how "tough" their job is, they are often judged to be less accomplished in their content areas. Even highly qualified special education and bilingual teachers are not typically thought of as having the background

and training needed to work with highly able students. These tendencies reflect deeply problematic (often racist and classist) assumptions and reinforce the idea that tracks represent "real" differences in one's value and potential.

Tracking Is Highly Subject to Bias

In U.S. schools, labeling and sorting have always had strong statistical overlaps with students' race, ethnicity, language status, and social class. White, wealthy, native English-speaking students are far more likely to be labeled as high ability or gifted and placed in high-level classes and in programs for those assumed to be college-bound. Meanwhile, low-income students, African Americans, Latinos, and English learners are disproportionately identified as less able and placed in low-ability, remedial, and special education classes and programs (Villegas, 1988). In New York City, for example, Black and Latino youth make up 70 percent of the student population but only 30 percent of those identified as gifted and talented (Garland, 2013). A recent *New York Times* article profiled one representative elementary school, where White students represented 27 percent of the overall population but 47 percent of students in the school's gifted program (Baker, 2013).

Our own research found that African American and Latino students were much less likely than White or Asian students *with the same test scores* to be placed in high-ability classes. In one school system, White and Asian students with average scores on standardized tests were more than twice as likely to be placed in "accelerated" classes than Latino students with *the same scores.* The discrimination was even more striking among the highest-scoring students. Whereas only 56 percent of very high-scoring Latinos were in accelerated classes, 93 percent of Whites and 97 percent of Asians with *comparable* test scores were. In three additional school systems, we found similar discrepancies between African American and White students (Lareau, 1989; Oakes, 1990; Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Yonezawa, 1997).

One history teacher, Matthew Flanders, described the outcome of these dynamics and discrepancies:

> This high school contains "two schools." . . . First, there is the advanced placement division. Highly motivated, adequately supported and taught, most of the students are White and are expected to go to college. Then there is the second "school" that is not expected to go on to higher education. These students are not motivated or engaged by school, are not given the best resources or teachers, and are overwhelmingly Latino and African American. This school's dropout rate is significantly higher than the first school's . . . [its] students have lost faith in themselves, in school, in peers.

More often than not this "two-schools" phenomenon—and the bias that contributes to its construction—reappears in some form wherever tracking occurs nationwide (Oakes, 1995, 2005; Welner, 2001).

While educators play a powerful role in how students are labeled and grouped, parents and students themselves may also acquire by their own actions certain advantages that an unbiased system would otherwise prevent (Lareau, 1989; Roda & Wells, 2013; Useem, 1991; Welner, 2001; Yonezawa & Oakes, 2004). For example, high-achieving, affluent, White students and parents are often more knowledgeable about grouping practices and more willing to "push the system" if they are displeased with the way they or their children are labeled or assigned to courses or if they see opportunities to secure a comparative advantage. Parents of lower-achieving students, low-income parents, those who are not native English speakers, and/or those who are cautious when interacting with public institutions, meanwhile, are frequently less comfortable challenging the system, and, given these parents' trepidation and/or limited "clout," some officials feel safe dismissing or ignoring their concerns. Indeed, underrepresented students themselves may opt out of higher-track classes if they feel those spaces are ones where students like themselves will be few in number, singled out, misunderstood, socially isolated, and so on (Rubin, 2008; Yonezawa, Wells & Serna, 2002). For these reasons among others, relying on "choice" mechanisms to place students into ability groups and tracks holds little promise for ameliorating problematic dynamics and outcomes.

Defenders of ability grouping and tracking sometimes claim that assignments are "objective" or "color-blind," and they attribute the disproportionate assignment of some students into college-prep or remedial classes to unfortunate differences in students' backgrounds and abilities. But these claims of scientific and bias-free objectivity are not supported when viewed in the context of historical and contemporary tracking practices and their results.

Tracking Privileges Organizational Needs over Student Needs

Ultimately, tracking practices are organizationally centered, rather than student centered. In other words, they privilege organizational imperatives—assigning teachers, managing students, distributing resources, coordinating schedules, and so on—over students' academic well-being. In secondary schools, administrators juggle many factors that may influence placements. For example, they must make sure that each student has a class every hour. Those who want football, beginning string class, or second-year computer drafting often get those classes, even if that means students wind up in low- rather than high-level content area courses, or vice versa. In addition, since each class must have approximately the same number of students, schools may place borderline students or students who enroll last in higher- or lower-level classes more out of convenience than anything else. As scholars have observed, "If there are 30 slots for learning disabled students in a school, then there will be 30 kids to fill those slots" (Mehan, Mercer & Rueda, 2002, p. 623). In other words, course distinctions, sequences, and tracks generally predate the students assigned to them; students are plugged and programmed into structures more often than structures are designed to "fit" students and their needs.

These structures, in turn, send powerful and legitimizing messages about students' needs and potentials. Consider the recent comments of a local school board committee member in Rhode Island who, when presenting more inclusive alternatives to an exclusive program for "accelerated" students, noted that part of the program's flaw was that "The kids that were left over in the [regular] classroom, a lot of them were labeled as 'dumb kids' and they weren't *necessarily* dumb" (Rodrigues, 2013, our italics). Even as such comments call out existing structures for their damaging impact on how students see themselves and one another, they also reveal deeper-seated tendencies among adults to categorize students in simplistic ways and to place some degree of faith in those categories and in the organizational structures that have long been built up around them.

Indeed, despite all the evidence to the contrary, tracking still appears efficient on its surface to some—particularly those who believe in bell-curve-like distributions of intelligence and talent. But these claims to efficiency hold only if one's ideas about efficiency have more to do with creating and perpetuating stratification by race and class than with meeting all students' needs and ensuring that students reach their full potential. One need only look at the track record (pun intended) of so many comprehensive (tracked) high schools and their tendency to produce outcomes that largely reflect racist, classist, and curve-like assumptions—relatively few students will excel, some young people will fare well enough, and many youth will underachieve and/or leave school before graduation—that undergird the structural design of the tracks into which students are placed and the distribution of resources across them.

What Are the Alternatives?

Taken together, the preceding sections of this chapter make it clear why, over years of schooling, students who are initially similar in background and skills become increasingly different in achievement when schools place them into separate, ability-grouped, tracked classes. Yet, in many ways, tracking remains a taken-for-granted, "common-sense" feature of many public schools and most secondary schools. Recognizing that this prevailing "common sense" hasn't helped to produce desired outcomes, many observers have recommended that schools begin dismantling structures that privilege so-called homogeneous grouping. They include many eminent scholars, policymakers, community leaders, and organizations: the directors of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, who concluded that tracking "fails to provide satisfactory achievement for either average or advanced students" (Schmidt, 1998, 4); the Carnegie Corporation's (1989) *Turning Points* initiative, which took aim at homogeneous grouping in middle schools specifically; the National Governors' Association (1993), whose members proposed eliminating most ability grouping and tracking; the College Board (2000), which argued that grouping practices erect barriers to minority students' achievement and called for eliminating mathematics tracking in racially

diverse high schools; the National Research Council (2003), which has argued that "both formal and informal tracking by ability be eliminated" (p. 6); and even most publishers of standardized achievement tests, who caution about using their assessments to group students. In addition, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, the Children's Defense Fund, the ACLU, the federal Government Accounting Office, and numerous community-based and advocacy organizations have all identified ability grouping, gifted education, and special education as second-generation segregation issues.

Even deeply problematic policies, such as No Child Left Behind, render tracking practices obsolete, for nothing in schools leaves children behind more systematically than tracking. Nevertheless, the usual response to well-supported charges that current grouping practices don't work and aren't fair is to fix, adjust, or modify them so that they better meet educators' intended goals. These are not the most promising ways forward for a various reasons.

The argument that educators can fix the technology of homogeneous grouping underestimates the cultural and political pressure to resist such modification and the consequent difficulty in making modifications stick. What we need instead are new ways of thinking about the relationship among students, curriculum, and the structures of schooling—guiding philosophies that aren't based on deterministic assumptions about some students' inevitable success and other students' inevitable failure. We also need new ways of teaching—ambitious pedagogies that maximize the potential of heterogeneous grouping and leverage diversity for deeper and more expansive learning.

To be fair, in an effort to eliminate discriminatory grouping practices and ensure that all students have access to high-quality curriculum, teachers, and learning experiences, schools around the country have been working—some now for decades—to alter their practices by moving away from tracking and providing rigorous college- and career-preparatory learning experiences for all students. We offer one sidebar example to demonstrate that sustained school-level detracking efforts *are* yielding transformative outcomes and doing so in open defiance of those who would argue that such efforts are futile or unlikely to generate desired improvements (Burris, Heubert, & Levin, 2006; Burris, Wiley, Welner, & Murphy, 2008; Oakes, 2005). Such efforts have a body of literature on which to draw to help make detracked classrooms work (e.g., Boaler & Staples, 2008; Cohen & Lotan, 1995; Lotan, 2006; Rubin, 2006; Watanabe, 2011; Welner & Burris, 2006). At the same time, more can and should be done, with an eye toward radical revisioning beyond what any existing example might represent.

What Else Will It Take?

Whatever the method or model, with any effort to reverse or resist ability grouping and tracking, the pedagogical challenges are significant and the political challenges even more daunting. Success will require that those who may now see

themselves as being in *competition*—such as advocates for the gifted, for students with disabilities, for students of color, and so on—make *common cause* around serving all students well. Educators have a critical role to play in building coalitions among these divergent constituencies and helping to disrupt forces that would seek to drive wedges between them in order to preserve the status quo. Educators must be prepared to guarantee—and also demonstrate—that new and different proposed practices will provide all students with opportunities that are at least as rich and rigorous as those students previously enjoyed. Few parents or advocates would agree to less. That said, some will object to *any* changes that take away the *comparative* advantages that privileged children enjoy—no matter how promising the new approaches might be. Confronting these challenges will require astute political leadership on educators' part—leadership that we should be wise and purposeful in cultivating.

Ending tracking will require changes similar in magnitude to social shifts such as the slow erosion of legal racial segregation and gender discrimination and the changes in norms regarding cigarette smoking. As with all deeply embedded social practices, knowledge, research, and righteous arguments alone will not be enough to bring about rapid transformation. But coalitions of people who see the harm in these practices *are* forming and making important headway in challenging the status quo. Those with much-needed professional knowledge and credible moral standing in the community are joining in the chorus of criticism *against* ability grouping and tracking and *for* inclusive, democratic, and socially just approaches that leverage student diversity for learning. While progress has been made, we have a long way to go and worthy trails to blaze.

DETRACKING IN ROCKVILLE CENTER

In 1990, Rockville Centre School District, a diverse suburban school district located on Long Island, New York, began replacing tracked classes with mixed-ability classes and teaching everyone the curriculum formerly reserved for the district's highest-track students. Previously, the high school had three tracks and the middle school had two or more tracks in each subject. African American and Latino students were enrolled disproportionately in the lowest tracks. The superintendent and the local Board of Education set ambitious goals: having 75 percent of graduates earn New York State Regents diplomas and closing racial and social-class gaps.

Realizing that tracking stood in the way of achieving those goals, the district decided that all students would study the accelerated middle-school math curriculum, since the Regents math test posed the greatest challenge. So the middle school enrolled mixed-ability groups in math classes formerly

reserved for the district's highest achievers, and it provided support classes and after-school tutoring to those who needed it. The following year, more than 90 percent of incoming freshman, excluding special education students, entered the district's South Side High School having passed the first Regents math examination. The percentages of African American and Latino students passing the algebra-based Regents exam in the eighth grade also increased dramatically—from 54 percent to 98 percent. Inspired but not satisfied, the district pushed further. The following year, special education students were included as well; detracking expanded to other subjects; and in 1999 detracking followed students into the ninth and tenth grades. Enrollment in South Side's advanced placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate classes was opened up to everyone who wanted to enroll.

During the first decade of detracking reform, the school became a U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon School of Excellence, and one of *Newsweek*'s "100 Best High Schools in the United States." By 2003, the gap among Rockville Centre graduates had diminished significantly. Eighty-two percent of all African American or Latino and 97 percent of all white or Asian American graduates earned a Regents diploma. In 2004, the overall Regents diploma rate increased to a remarkable 94 percent.

Research on students' pathways through and beyond South Side High School further debunks the myth that detracking compromises the learning of high-track students. To the contrary, researchers offer South Side's case as evidence that "a well-executed detracking reform can help increasing numbers of students reach state and worldclass standards without adversely affecting high-achieving students" (Burris, Wiley, Welner, and Murphy (2008), p. 601). In Rockville Centre, detracking raised the bar for all students. Every group improved at the same time that the achievement gap narrowed dramatically.

Carol Burris the principal of South Side High School, now spends a great deal of her time helping other schools create heterogeneous classrooms with rigorous college preparatory curriculum. She has become widely known for her research, advocacy, and expertise in creating high-quality "detracked" schools. She was named 2013 High School Principal of the Year by the School Administrators Association of New York State.

Notes

1. The block quotations in this chapter are adapted from the text of an earlier chapter published in *Teaching to Change the World* (Oakes, Lipton, Anderson, & Stillman, 2013). The excerpts have been used with permission from the writing of former University of California, Los Angeles teacher education students.

2. Although labels don't always convey it explicitly, everyone tends to know the so-called ability level of various groups.
3. This is not to say that *particular* classes for lower-ability students are not given wonderful facilities, a solid curriculum, and well-qualified teachers, but such situations are generally exceptions to the rule.

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