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Students' Perspectives on Tracking and Detracking

Detracking has been described as an equity-minded reform that attempts to level the playing field among students of different socio-economic, racial, and linguistic groups. Yet few people have talked to students about their perspectives regarding this reform, and the challenges students may face when schools reduce the number or levels of differentiated courses. In this article, the authors use student focus group data gathered at 12 schools implementing detracking reforms from 2000–2002 to explore how students make sense of tracking practices and equity-minded policies to reduce tracking at their schools. At the core of this sense-making process is the notion that students' understandings of meritocracy, intelligence, and stratification influence their perceptions of tracking and detracking practices. The authors also discuss how students' beliefs about such topics can inform educators' and policymakers' approaches to equity-minded reforms such as detracking.

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DETRACKING HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS an equity-minded reform that attempts to level the playing field among students of different socio-economic, racial, and linguistic groups (Oakes, 1996; Wheelock, 1992). Yet few people have gathered students' perspectives regarding this reform and the challenges students face when schools reduce differentiated courses (Yonezawa & Wells, 2004). Students often mirror the norms and values of the larger society that bolster tracking practices. They also struggle to make sense of (and sometimes resist) detracking efforts.

In this article, we use student focus group data from 12 schools implementing detracking reforms (2000–2002) to explore *how students make sense of tracking practices and equity-minded policies to detrack their schools.* We show how students' understandings of meritocracy, intelligence, and stratification influence their perceptions of detracking. We also discuss how students' beliefs

about such topics can inform educators' and policymakers' approaches to equity-minded reforms such as detracking.

Overview of Literature on Tracking and the Gap Regarding Students' Perceptions

Tracking practices and equity-minded reforms proposed to ameliorate tracking's inequitable outcomes have been frequently examined over the past two decades. We now know that teachers' sometimes use students' retrospective characteristics such as their perceived potential as *signals* to judge students' abilities (Rosenbaum, 1976). Counselors and sometimes teachers can *cool out* (discourage) or *push up* (encourage) students' upward movement in track structures (Resh & Erhard, 2002; Yonezawa, 2000). Parents also shape where students are placed in tracked systems (Lareau, 1989; Useem, 1991). These judgments can translate into differentiated curriculum and rigor across tracks with African American, Latino, and low-income students of all races often ending up in the lowest tracks, whereas Asian American, White, and higher income students reside in advanced tracks (Oakes, Gamoron, & Page, 1992).

Students often have misinformation about their own track placements (Rosenbaum, 1980). Many students believe they are in a higher academic track than they actually are, giving them a false sense of preparedness for college (Dornbusch, 1994). Low-track placements can lower students' sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem (George, 1993), and can shape their peer groups (Hallinan & Williams, 1990).

Recently, track structures have become extremely malleable and less tournament-like because students are rarely tracked low or high across subject areas, but rather are ability grouped within a given subject area (Lucas & Good, 2001). A student might, for example, be in regular mathematics but in remedial English. This alteration in tracking practices makes it difficult to document quantitatively the extent and impact of tracking

(Lucas, 1999). Most researchers conclude that defacto tracking occurs because students who perform well in one academic area likely do well in others (Lucas & Berends, 2002). Yet despite research on tracking and detracking, students' perceptions of tracking reform is unclear. This article remedies that by sharing how students understand tracking and detracking.

Data Collection

In this article, we focus on what students say when they talk about tracking and detracking. From 1999–2000, we had the opportunity to run student inquiry groups at four high schools across two large, urban school districts. In the two years that followed, we expanded data collection to more high schools within one of the two districts and added a third district. By the end of 2002, our team had amassed student data from 12 high schools across three urban districts. The 12 schools enrolled between 1400 to 3000 students each. Three schools served 17- to 32-percent low-income students, whereas the remaining nine schools served a majority of low-income students.

Data collection occurred during 75 student group meetings with over 500 students. Respondents came from a cross-section of race, grade-point average (GPA), grade level, gender, and track from each high school. All respondents participated by invitation, and met in small groups 2 to 8 times annually (depending on the school site and year) for 1 hour each time.[1] The students were 48% male and 52% female and 24% White, 36% African American, 29% Latino, 11% Asian, and 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native. There were nearly equal percentages of students across 9th through 12th grades, with slightly fewer freshmen (17%) and slightly more 10th graders (35%). Weakest representation occurred among lowest achieving students as only 13% of the students maintained a 1.99 or below GPA, whereas 40% maintained a GPA of 2.00–2.99, and 47% had a 3.00 or above.

Meetings were held before or after school, during reading periods, and during lunch. We often

rotated the session times to ensure participation of students in extra-curricular activities and with part-time jobs. Extra efforts were made to recruit students with low grade point averages and those from low-track classes. Participating students received food or a gift certificate to a local merchant.

The purpose of the student groups covered how students understood track structures within their schools and their thoughts on how to improve their schools structurally and culturally. It is from this pool of data that we analyzed students' perspectives about tracking and detracking. At the schools, administrators and teachers reduced tracks by eliminating remedial courses in math, *double-dosing* (offering two periods of) courses in English, or introducing rigorous freshman science courses. Sometimes, schools expanded advanced placement (AP) offerings and enrollment criteria. The sections below include quotations from student groups to illustrate students' perspectives. Each statement represents a theme supported by a substantial amount of data. Whether or not the students' views accurately represent what occurred is not our point, rather our purpose is to share students' perspectives on tracking and detracking.

What Students Said About Tracking

Oakes and her colleagues argue that tracking and detracking require a response to the school's normative, social, and political climate, not just shifts in policies (Oakes, 1992; Oakes, Wells, Datnow, & Jones, 1997). Similarly, the students we spoke with recognized that tracking was shaped by structural, cultural, and political forces that determined how students were placed; what kinds of teaching and curricula were offered; and the importance of tracking in preserving a sense of meritocracy among some students.

Interestingly, despite the fact that many students benefited from the track structure by receiving placement in AP and honors courses, most felt there was something inherently inequitable about the tracked system. The vagaries of placement policies, inequitable distribution of qualified teachers, and the feeling that they faced a tourna-

ment model—where it was easier to move down tracks than up—made the students uncomfortable.

- Placement and tracking practices seemed unfair to students.

Focus group results suggested that students largely believed that the tracking and placement practices within their schools were unfair. Very few students knew how track placements occurred. Students supposed that tracking happened through a mix of teacher recommendation, prior middle school placements, grades, test scores, and luck. But they recognized that scheduling constraints also seemed to play an unfair role in what courses were offered and to whom. As one student noted,

> Our school is screwed up because a lot of kids get put into advanced classes and they're not supposed to be there just because there's not enough room. Then the people, who should be in the classes, get stuck in like genre studies and classes they shouldn't be in and it's just based on who they put in first. They'll just fill it up with people and I don't think that's right.

To this student, and many others, track placements appeared arbitrary, designed to serve the needs of their schools' master schedules rather than the needs of the students.

Students raised questions illustrating their belief in the unfairness of tracking. For instance, they asked why only some students knew that AP courses were available to sophomores as well as to juniors and seniors. They were concerned about seemingly non-rational approaches to tracking, such as policies that prevented students from taking AP World History without also signing up for AP English.

> Student 1: You can choose to take AP English and AP History, but you had to get your English teacher to recommend you. And I asked and she was like, "Yeah, sure." But then, she said that I probably wouldn't like

AP English because there's a lot of reading and not as much …

    Student 2: Interactive [work]?

    Student 1: Yeah, interactive [work], creative stuff, where you do skits and stuff like that. I really like that. So [the teacher] was, "Yeah, just try to get into the AP World History." So I went in and asked my counselor and she was, "No. If you want to be in World History, you have to be in both. You can't just have AP English or AP History. You have to have both of them." I don't understand.

The policies that guided tracking practices befuddled many students who often questioned the underlying rationales of the system.

- Using test scores to guide placement seemed unfair to students.

    Many students told us that they were frustrated by policies that placed them or their peers in courses as a result of test scores. All the students agreed that test scores did not reflect students' motivation or ability. Some students spoke of classmates who had "blown off the test" and, as a result, been misplaced. They argued that speed should not be a proxy for intelligence. Just because some students take longer to complete work, many students said, did not mean that they did not belong in higher level courses:

> Some people they read real fast and they get done with the test real quick. But some people they read real slow and then if they can't finish the test, they just mark all the ones that they didn't finish. They just mark them all wrong. You know, what I'm saying? They're not judging what you did … . So [a student] ends up in a class and he knows he can read and everything, stories, but they put him in that class just because he can't read fast.

The idea that course placement was based on the speed by which they learned or expressed their knowledge incensed many students. Students also complained that if their families moved frequently or if they entered a school late they were shuttled into a class with little thought as to the appropriate level, despite schools' claims that testing drove placement.

> Like me, I didn't have the chance to take that test to get placed in the real classes after I left a month early from the other school … . So I didn't have time to take the test. I just got sent to the [lower] class. I'm not supposed to be there.

Although we do not have exact numbers, many of the students argued that standardized and reading tests and other measures were inaccurate. This held true even among students who did well on tests and who were currently in advanced placement courses. They, too, put little weight on standardized testing as an accurate measure of students' abilities.

- Students believed tracking meant struggling students received less rigorous and engaging teachers and curriculum.

    Tracking, students argued, widened the achievement gap with weaker students often getting less attentive, caring, and knowledgeable teachers. Students reported that AP teachers often had higher expectations of their students, appeared to spend more time planning and preparing for those classes, and openly stated that they preferred to teach those classes. One student explained,

> My history teacher focuses more on her AP classes than on her lower level classes. Sometimes she'll come to school just to go to her AP classes and won't even come to ours. She tells us. She said, "Well, I'll be here to go to my AP class, but you guys are going to have a substitute." I see [it] like, "So we're not good enough that you can come to our class too." That's not really fair. Maybe if she cares more about them, then she came [to school] more to prepare them more than us, so maybe she's not teaching us everything she needs to teach us, because she's spending more time trying to help them and that's not fair.

All students need access to high quality teaching and caring teachers, said the students, but they believed that the lowest performing students were most likely to get weak teachers.

Although the students recognized that some of their peers should be allowed to move faster through material, many did not believe regular, honors, and AP students should be given different opportunities to learn. They lamented the gap between the education received by advanced and regular students:

> Student 1: Between advanced and regular, there shouldn't be that big of a gap.
>
> Student 2: Of course, AP is going to be different. That's a college course. But [not] to the point where they're not getting the same education, they're not getting the same opportunity. Just because you're taking the regular class, [you] shouldn't get less of an education. [You] should still get a good education.
>
> Student 3: It should still be just as challenging too.
>
> Student 4: It should still be challenging.
>
> Student 1: I think the only difference between advanced and regular [should be] advanced goes a little bit faster.

All students should be challenged, reasoned students, otherwise we risk increasing the achievement gap.

• Students claimed tracking felt like a tournament, easier to move down than up.

Despite recent research to the contrary (Lucas, 1999), the students reported that tracking at their schools still felt tournament-like. Advanced placement and honors students were acutely aware that one misstep could result in moving down in any given subject. "It seems like you can really only move down," said one student. Another student remarked, "And it's very easy for you to move down, very easy." A third student explained,

> It seems kind of like our school has a bunch of different tracks you can take. And at any one point you mess up, it kind of screws up your future on that same track and there is really no making up for it, and I really don't like that … . It seems like you can really only move down.

Rosenbaum (1976) described the tracking system as a tournament model nearly three decades ago. The students we spoke with argued that this tournament feeling persisted today.

• Some students believed tracking was necessary to preserve a sense of meritocracy.

At one-third of the schools, a few students openly backed the practice of tracking. These students saw tracking as necessary to preserve a sense of meritocracy, and believed their inherent intelligence and motivation warranted greater access to good teachers and rigorous curriculum. Many of these students came from advanced placement and honors classes. They argued that it was difficult to learn in mixed ability settings.

> If they're in a class where everyone is scattered all over the place, you got slow, medium and fast, the teacher has to … teach it at the slowest pace, right? So they teach at the slowest pace, and the faster learning students are trying to learn, and they're not getting taught fast enough, so they just give up, sit back. They're not living up to their potential like they should be. And it's all due to their classrooms [being] slower.

One student even suggested that courses should be separated into classes for "those who care" and classes for students "who don't care." She and others were frustrated by peers who disrupted classes, demanded more of teachers' time, and slowed the curricular pace. They became upset when teachers "catered" to these students.

What Students Said About Detracking

Perhaps most interesting was that students understood the complicated nature of detracking as a reform. Students adamantly told us that efforts to

detrack required far more than simple, structural changes. They came up with concrete suggestions for approaching detracking that echoed findings from professionals who have attempted and examined this reform (Oakes, Wells, Datnow, & Jones, 1997; Wheelock, 1992). Students stated what many educators and researchers have spent many frustrating years and millions of dollars uncovering. For example, students argued that teachers must first think differently about students, learn new ways of teaching, and demand more of their students. Students remained skeptical of teachers' abilities to do these things essential to detracking efforts.

• Students reported that detracking took more than eliminating levels; it required teachers to believe in all students.

Students' biggest concern about detracking was their belief that many teachers did not have equally high expectations of all students. Whether these varied expectations occurred across classrooms or within a single class, students stated that teachers frequently conveyed lower expectations for some students. For example, a student in one group talked about the senior calculus teacher who openly degraded his remedial algebra students.

> My calculus teacher, he's got two calculus classes and three, like, he calls them failure algebra classes and it's not about race but [laughs] the things he says are just really . . . I mean, maybe it's just his personality, he's a real jerk. But I mean, he is really sarcastic and stuff and makes fun of them to us, and I don't know if they found out. I think he says that he makes fun of them straight to their face so maybe they know about it. . . . I mean, it's funny but it's just kind of sad that they are, I guess, degraded like that.

Such comments troubled many students, whether high-achieving or struggling, as they saw the teachers' words as signaling an inability to treat all students fairly.

• Students stated detracking demanded that teachers teach equitably and differently.

Teachers, students argued, were ill-prepared to teach more rigorous material to a mixed-ability group of students or to formerly lower track students. Some students complained that teachers, when faced with a mixed-ability classroom, taught to the slowest students or favored advanced students. Usually, students stated, favoritism extended to the higher achieving students:

> I've kind of noticed that teachers tend to like you better if you're the A student. But if you're the lower student, then they don't really like you. I mean the A student wants to learn. But some people who are having trouble want to learn [too].

Whether the favoritism meant that some students received more one-on-one time or were just allowed to use the bathroom more, many students felt that teachers needed time and training to address the needs of all students if detracking was to succeed.

• Students felt they needed more rigorous courses.

Perhaps most interesting was that many of the students, regardless of track level, believed their classes needed to be more rigorous. Students from lower tracked classrooms told us that they had spent long days sitting through boring and repetitive material. Their experiences cohered with studies of *drill and kill*, rote curricular tasks and cultures in low-track classes (Oakes, Gamaron, & Page, 1992). These experiences puzzled the students who honestly believed that educators wanted lower tracked students to do better but didn't understand why educators didn't emphasize challenging these students:

> You would think the kids in the [remedial] and regular classes would need that little extra that teachers that I have give us [in AP and honors classes], you know? And I just think it's so unfortunate that they don't have it. They'll put the teacher who [isn't as qualified in lower level classes]. I don't know. It's just not fair. I don't think it's fair.

Interestingly, students in low-level classes were not the only ones who felt their classrooms lacked challenge. Several advanced placement and honors level students also criticized the rigor in their courses.

> I've been in mostly AP English classes throughout high school and I've had two English teachers. My junior year English teacher, if you missed one day of her class, you felt like you were missing an entire week. You went to that class, you didn't miss it, because you'd be so far behind if you missed a day that it would take a while to catch up. The English teacher I had this year—I got sick and I missed over a week of class. I came back one day, I was caught up. Personally, I feel that's unacceptable teaching.

In courses where teachers demanded less, many students reported feeling poorly prepared for AP exams and ill-prepared for college. Many received good grades, but these students stated that their teachers, regardless of the track level, needed to increase demands so more students could master essential material.

Students' Beliefs Might Help Enact Tracking Reform

The results of our study suggest that the students we spoke to embraced a tremendous sense of equity—greater than that of many adults who are confronted with issues of tracking and detracking (Wells & Serna, 1996). Indeed, for many participating students, sorting and separating students by perceived ability seemed unjust.

Students appeared able to critique the track system because many knew peers whom they felt the system did not adequately serve. Students told us about friends, classmates, teammates, or relatives whom they believed to be intelligent but who had been relegated to lower level classes due to poor grades, mediocre test scores, or wayward work habits. In some cases, students recalled how they personally had experienced under-challenging curriculum and under-motivated teachers, and felt viewed by educators as unintelligent.

This finding counters earlier work by Hallinan and Williams (1990) who argued that in more stringent tracked systems students' peer groups came mainly from similar track levels. Our finding implies that, in today's less rigid track systems, students might witness more interactions among students and teachers across track levels. Even higher tracked students might know peers who have been wrongly treated and attribute some of this mistreatment to tracking practices.

We suspect students also found the tracked system troubling because they still largely believed that the educational system in America should provide opportunity and access for all students. One student stated that everyone should still get a good education regardless of their skill level. Although students recognized that they and their peers varied in the skills they possessed, and some were frustrated by the slow pace of classrooms due to less-skilled peers, they blamed their frustrations on teachers' inability to teach a mixed-ability class instead of on classmates' needs. In refreshingly simple terms, most students told us that no one group deserved greater concern, but rather everybody should get an equal amount of attention.

It is our belief that policymakers and educators, when attempting detracking efforts, should capitalize on the fairness we discovered in many students. Not all students will be supportive of detracking reforms (a few at several schools were not in our study). But many students are natural allies when policymakers, administrators, and teachers push detracking reform.

Student voice can be a powerful tool to shaping educational reform and policies if used appropriately (Jones & Yonezawa, 2002; Yonezawa & Jones, in press). Their perspectives often capture the realities of classroom and school life in vivid detail. Through their eyes, adults can learn about the flaws in the current educational system, and the inequitable practices that go on within low and high-tracked classrooms.

The students we spoke with, perhaps better than most adults, recognized that their teachers were not well equipped to teach heterogeneous groups of students and that some teachers were quite weak. Therefore, before our students could

be convinced that detracking is worthwhile, they had to believe that administrators and teachers recognized what teaching in a detracked system would require: a close scrutiny of teaching and serious professional development. We believe from our conversations with students that they hold us adults accountable for making the deep normative, technical, and political changes needed (Oakes, 1992) to detrack schools.

Finally, we must recognize that when some students resist detracking, their resistance mirrors adult resistance. Students are not immune to the societal norms that emphasize competition, stratification, and a winner-take-all mentality. Policy makers and educators need to address these deep-seated cultural norms among adults *and* students if they are to address the arguments of those resistant to detracking.

Note

1. The extent to which we met with each group depended on funding we had for the specific project at each school. At schools were we had greater resources, we were able to hold more extensive sessions.

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