**Tracking and Its Relationship to High School Dropouts**

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Schools are important agents of socialization and social stratification in today’s society and the educational policies, practices, and forms of organization that are intended to raise levels of school achievement often lead to, and promote, educational stratification. One of these questionable practices is academic tracking, the system of assigning high school students to different curricular tracks according to their abilities. Some see tracking as a necessary practice to provide appropriate opportunities for learning in a diverse population, while others see it as a system for maintaining social inequality in a stratified society. In order to discuss tracking, Gamoran and Mare (1989) argue that one must distinguish between the two effects, or consequences, of tracking: effects on educational productivity and effects on educational inequality. They distinguish productivity as raising or lowering average outcomes, while labeling inequality as the increase or reduction in how outcomes are dispersed, both overall and among groups of students. The inequality piece is the most troubling, as it is the one that has the potential to either afford a student all the possibilities he or she deserves or prevent that student from reaching his or her true potential. The inequality piece also plays into the persistence of the achievement gap in the United States. Not only does the practice of tracking adversely affect the educational experiences of the students who are subjected to it, but those adverse effects tend to fall on the shoulders of low-income and students of color, who also happen to be the groups that suffer from the highest school dropout rates in the nation. This review of the literature aims to identify and explore the practice of tracking, why it tends to target certain groups of students, the effects it can have on students’ educational experiences and careers, and how those effects impact urban communities on a larger scale.

Schools use tracking or ability grouping to accommodate instruction to meet the needs, interests, and abilities of a diverse population. The assumption that students will learn best when the instructional content is well matched to their current knowledge and abilities “requires,” some would argue, dividing students into homogeneous learning groups to have an effective instructional program. Theoretically, teachers can offer homogeneous groups lessons that no student will find too hard or too easy, thereby maximizing each student's motivation and learning. While high school students are usually assigned to academic, general, or vocational tracks, they are also often assigned to separate ability-grouped courses within the curriculum tracks (e.g., honors or advanced placement, regular, and remedial courses). The arguments against tracking usually focus on the findings which reveal that tracking leads to unequal educational opportunities by distributing formal and informal educational resources unequally to different students (Darling-Hammond, 1989). Critics of tracking point out that the lower track classrooms are usually assigned the least experienced teachers even though they enroll the students with the greatest needs and who may be the most challenging to teach. Indeed, many districts and schools allow their most senior teachers to choose the tracks they wish to teach, which can result in weaker learning environments for the lowest tracks. Other critics describe a cumulative process throughout the grades that actually widens the gap in aspirations and achievement between students in the top and bottom tracks over time (Oakes, 1985). Because the learning environments are weaker in the lower tracks, a student who is first assigned to a lower-track class has an even poorer chance to move up to a higher level at the next grade level. Thus, the effects of tracking produce slower and slower rates of learning and lower and lower levels of motivation for those at the bottom and smaller and smaller chances of receiving better track assignments. Numerous case studies also show that the lower track classes are often stigmatized by a general feeling that their students are not capable learners and cannot be expected to master the same kinds of skills that are demanded of other classes. When such negative images are shared by teachers and students in lower track classes, certain instructional consequences follow: fewer curriculum units are covered, the pace of instruction is slower, fewer demands are made for learning higher order thinking skills, and test and homework requirements are taken less seriously (Oakes, 1985).

Among African American youth and other young people in our society, educational aspirations – the foundation of future educational and occupational attainment – are developed in large measure through their experiences in schools. Schools are the primary institution in which educational socialization occurs, yet schools have failed to provide even basic opportunities for the development of literacy, social skills, and educational aspirations for far too many of the students they serve, especially students of color. Although American public education is based on a common school ideology that purports to promote equal access to all learners, widespread and entrenched patterns of tracking and ability grouping in our nation's schools often result in unequal classroom learning environments and opportunities for students. If students primarily learn the knowledge and values they are taught or to which they are exposed, then these differentiated, in-school learning opportunities have important implications for young people's educational aspirations and subsequent attainment. Such differences not only imply different learning outcomes, they may also lead to differences among students in motivation to learn and attachment to school. Studies of tracking and ability grouping have called attention to the potentially harmful effects of these practices on African American and low-income racial and ethnic subgroup students, who are often overrepresented among the low tracks and classes (Oakes, 1985).

The effect of tracking on the achievement of African American students is generally perceived to be negative (Braddock and Dawkins, 1993; Oakes and Guiton, 1995), as African American students tend to be located disproportionately in low-ability tracks that provide fewer challenging learning opportunities than average or accelerated tracks. Braddock and Dawkins (1993) found that eighth graders’ plans to enroll in high school college preparatory classes differed markedly by the ability level of their current classes even when accounting for socioeconomic status and prior achievement. They also found that track arrangements impact students’ future educational opportunities. Oakes and Guiton (1995) suggest that tracking decisions are shaped by the following: the way schools view students’ abilities, motivation, and aspirations (as being fixed characteristics); curriculum that works to maintain, not alter, student characteristics; curriculum tailored to accommodate high-achieving students; and the way race, ethnicity, and social class signal ability and motivation. They found that differences in course participation flowed, in large part, from educators’ perceptions about race and social class differences in academic abilities and motivation. Schools rarely pressed African American or Latino students to stretch beyond their own or others’ low expectations. Weinstein, Madison, and Kuklinski (1995) found that perceived deficits in students and lack of support for mixed ability teaching were among the factors that prevented the raising of expectations in schooling. The practice of tracking places limitations on the potential of many capable students who experience early frustration, resignation to inferior curricula, and low teacher expectations (Wheelock, 1992) and too often, these practices account for students of color dropping out of school (Gill, 1991; Kunjufu, 1993; Tribble, 1992).

Using the data from the first follow up study of the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988, Braddock and Dawkins (1993) uncover patterns of high school curriculum track placements for African American, Asian American, Latino, American Indian, and White tenth-grade students:

African American. In 1990, 32% of African American tenth-grade students were enrolled in academic programs compared to 39% of White sophomores; 44% were in general education programs versus 52% of Whites; and 24% were enrolled in vocational education programs compared to 10% of White sophomores. Therefore, African American students were significantly overrepresented in the vocational education track and significantly underrepresented in the academic and general program tracks compared to White tenth graders.

Latino. In 1990, 30% of Latino tenth-grade students were enrolled in academic programs compared to 39% of White sophomores; 54% were in general education programs versus 52% of Whites; and 16% of Latino tenth graders were enrolled in vocational education programs compared to 10% of White sophomores. Thus, compared to Whites, Latino sophomores were significantly overrepresented in the vocational education track, significantly underrepresented in the academic track, and nearly equal in the general education program track.

Asian American. Overall, 46% of Asian American sophomores were enrolled in academic programs compared to 39% of White tenth-grade students; 42% were in general education programs compared to 52% of Whites; and 12% were enrolled in vocational education programs versus 10% of White sophomores. Thus, compared to Whites in 1990, Asian American tenth-graders were more highly represented in the academic track, significantly underrepresented in the general education track, and nearly equally represented in the vocational education track.

American Indian. Among American Indian sophomores overall, 25% in 1990 were enrolled in academic programs compared to 39% of White sophomores; 50% were in general education programs versus 52% of Whites; and 25% were enrolled in vocational education programs compared to 10% of White sophomores. Thus, American Indian students were significantly overrepresented in the vocational education track, almost on par with Whites in the general education track, yet significantly underrepresented in the academic program track relative to their White peers.

The disparities in the distribution of various racial and ethnic groups of students in curriculum tracks and ability groups and on the effects of placement in those tracks and groups have many implications for equity in American education. First, the findings on the effects of curriculum tracking and ability grouping indicate that changes in school organization and classroom practice need to be made. There may have been a time when curriculum tracking in schools actually did coincide with the needs of the society and the economy outside of schools. That is, in the past, American society may have needed a portion of students to pursue further education and careers that depended upon that education, while another cohort of students were needed to enter the workforce directly and perform the important and even well-paying jobs that required less formal education. This situation has changed dramatically, but curriculum tracking still exists and is widely practiced in American schools today. Presently, the effects of curriculum tracking and ability grouping are negative not only for African American and Latino students, but for White students and students from other ethnic groups. However, because African American and Latino students constitute our largest minority populations and the future economic health of the country depends upon their access to a high-quality education, they represent a special concern. Yet, for these groups, the tracking and ability grouping they are confronted with serves to lower students' educational aspirations and attainments. The disparities in student distribution across tracks and ability groups and the apparent effects of this inequity upon students' educational aspirations and attainments signify that if schools are to meet the future requirements of our economy and society for a more highly skilled workforce, public schools must provide more equitable access to learning opportunities. In order to accomplish this shift in educational policy, schools will have to engage in major school restructuring efforts that will encourage effective alternatives to tracking and homogeneous ability grouping.

While some scholars study the negative effects of tracking, few have linked it to the dropout epidemic taking place in the nation. Thousands of American youth are school dropouts, with an estimated one in eight students never graduating from high school. In fact, high school graduation rates have not changed significantly since 1990 (National Educational Goals Panel, 2002). The startling statistic that one high school student drops out every nine seconds illustrates the severity and magnitude of the problem (Children’s Defense Fund, 2002) and most states are far from the 90% graduation rate that was targeted in the early 1990s (National Educational Goals Panel, 2002). Furthermore, students with disabilities are much more likely to drop out of school than their general-education peers. Also, dropout rates are disproportionately high for students from Hispanic, African American, Native American, and low-income backgrounds; students who live in single-parent homes; and those who attend large urban schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). While most explanations for school dropout look at students’ personal backgrounds and characteristics, very few look at how school structures and organization may influence a students’ decision to stay in or drop out of school. The literature suggests that schools have an influence on dropout and mobility in two ways (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). One way is indirectly, through general policies and practices, such as tracking, that are designed to promote the overall effectiveness of schools. These policies and practices, along with other characteristics of schools, may contribute to voluntary student dropout by affecting the conditions that keep students engaged and interested in school. This perspective looks at student disengagement, which happens frequently in lower-track classes because of the reduced (or nonexistent) rigor, slower pace, and lack of connection or relationship with the teacher, as the precursor to withdrawal. The other way schools can affect student dropout is through explicit policies and conscious decisions that cause students to involuntarily withdraw from school. These policies can be related to low grades, poor attendance, and misbehavior, all of which are common problems in lower-track classes because students feel no engagement or attachment to or interest in their academic careers. Either way, the problem of school dropout cannot be isolated from the context and structure of school. Early school withdrawal reflects a complex interplay among student, family, school, and community variables (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001). For example, schools with the highest graduation rates tend to have relatively small enrollment, fair discipline policies, caring teachers, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation. Policies that support suspension and grade retention for students who are deemed not ready to advance have been linked to higher dropout rates.

These dropout statistics are particularly alarming because jobs that pay living wages and benefits have virtually disappeared for youth without a high school diploma. For society, the costs of dropout are staggering, estimated in the billions of dollars in lost revenues, welfare programs, unemployment programs, underemployment, and crime prevention and prosecution (Christenson et al., 2001). Given these individual and societal consequences, helping all students complete school should be a critical concern for researchers, policymakers, and educators across the country. Promoting school completion requires more than preventing dropout. It is characterized by school personnel emphasizing development of students’ competencies rather than dwelling on their deficits. Successful programs are comprehensive, linking family, school, and community efforts rather than offering a single, narrow intervention in one environment, are implemented over time rather than at a single period in time, and make an effort to tailor interventions to fit individual students rather than adopting a programmatic ‘‘one size fits all’’ orientation. School-completion programs have a long-term focus, aiming to promote a ‘‘good’’ outcome, not simply prevent a ‘‘bad’’ outcome for students and society (Christenson et al., 2001). The dropout problem in the United States is solvable, provided student performance is monitored to ensure students are provided with opportunities for academic success, supported as learners by educators and families, encouraged to see the relevance of school and learning in their personal lives and future goals, and helped with personal problems across the school years. Increasing students’ engagement and enthusiasm for school requires much more than simply having them stay in school – it involves raising the academic standards for all students and then supporting them to help them meet those goals. If students are engaged at school and with learning, they should not only graduate but also demonstrate academic and social competence.

It has been shown that Blacks, Latinos, and other non-White racial groups are overrepresented in both general education and vocational tracks and underrepresented in tracks that require more rigorous academic work. It has also been shown that these groups of students are much less likely to graduate from high school than their White peers. I have suggested here that those students who are placed in lower academic tracks are more likely to feel that lack of engagement due to the lowered expectations and rigor of their classes and are therefore more likely to become a dropout statistic. The decision to drop out is a dangerous one for the student, particularly in a post-Industrial and technological age in which workers need at least a high school diploma to compete in the workforce. According to “The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts” (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006), high school dropouts are much more likely than their peers who graduate to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, in prison, on death row, unhealthy, divorced, and single parents with children who drop out of high school themselves. In its 2009 annual report, Communities In Schools, a national organization dedicated to helping keep kids in school, states that over the course of a lifetime, a high school dropout earns, on average, over $260,000 less than a high school graduate and over $1 million less than a college graduate. The report also estimates that the dropouts from the class of 2008 alone will cost the nation more than $319 billion in lost wages over the course of their lifetimes. Students who drop out of high school are often unable to support themselves and high school dropouts were over three times more likely than college graduates to be unemployed in 2004. They are twice as likely as high school graduates to slip into poverty from one year to the next and there even seems to be a correlation with education and good health – at every age range, the more education, the healthier the individual. Among Americans over 45, college graduates are twice as likely as dropouts to report being in excellent or very good health (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). For those who need a more collective reason to reverse the dropout trend, the report also suggests that if high schools and colleges raise the graduation rates of Black, Latino, and Native American students to the levels of White students by 2020, the potential increase in personal income would add more than $310 billion to the United States economy.

The prevalence of high dropout rates not only harms individual futures but also profoundly impacts our communities and nation due to the loss of productive workers, the earnings and revenues they would have generated, and the higher costs associated with increased incarceration, health care and social services. Four out of every 10 young adults, ages 16 to 24, lacking a high school diploma received some type of government assistance in 2001, and a dropout is more than eight times as likely to be in jail or prison as a person with at least a high school diploma. Studies show that the lifetime cost to the nation for each youth who drops out of school and later moves into a life of crime and drugs ranges from $1.7 to $2.3 million. (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). Because many of these “statistics” are often Black and Latino students living in our nation’s large urban cities, the impact it has on those communities is astounding. As it stands, the practices in many of the nation’s schools stand to perpetuate the cycle of limited life chances and opportunities of their students rather than provide them with the tools, skills, and confidence to change their current path.

Whatever their achievement effects may be, tracking programs in all forms are being increasingly questioned by many educators, many of whom feel uncomfortable making decisions that could have such significant long-term effects on students' self-esteem and life chances. Additionally, the possibility that ability grouping may create racially identifiable groups or classes in desegregated schools is also of great concern to educators (Epstein, 1985). For these and other reasons, several alternatives to ability grouping have been proposed. One appealing alternative to ability grouping proposed by Oakes (1985) involves cooperative learning instructional methods in which students work in small, mixed-ability learning groups. Research on cooperative learning has found that when cooperating groups are rewarded based on the learning of all group members, students learn consistently more than those who learn by traditional methods (Slavin & Carweit, 1985). Thus, cooperative learning offers one plausible alternative to ability grouping in that it views student diversity as a valued resource to be used in the classroom rather than as a problem to be solved. Braddock and McPartland (1990) describe several other alternatives to ability grouping such as flexible grouping processes, which may include some tracking but only in mathematics and/or English and not in other subjects. Their approach involves using appropriate subject-matter tests to make student placements in selected subjects, making all groups as heterogeneous as possible, even in tracked classes, and covering basic subjects at all levels. These alternatives require a national commitment to search for effective and innovative responses to student diversity. Researchers can contribute to this effort by continuing to find out more about the effects of current practices on diverse groups of students. This commitment must also be shared by school systems in terms of greater investment in efforts that have the potential to improve the negative impact of ability grouping and tracking and ensure that every student has the opportunity to learn to his or her fullest potential.

**Resources**

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