SOCIAL ISSUES AND EDUCATION: CHALLENGE & RESPONSIBILITY

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CHAPTER TWO

Tracking: Beliefs, Practices, and Consequences

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NEARLY ALL SCHOOLS TRACK. SCHOOLS EVERYWHERE ORGANIZE INSTRUCTION BY DIVIDing students into groups that appear to have similar aptitudes, achievement levels, or future plans. Given the inevitable diversity of student populations, tracking is seen as the primary way to address individual needs and to cope with individual differences. It was not always so.

Tracking became standard practice in turn-of-the-century America with the spread of compulsory schooling laws, the proliferation of publicly supported high schools, and the influx of immigrants and newly freed blacks into northern cities. A heated debate occupied the educational agenda and public interest for nearly two decades over how curriculum should be organized in schools confronted with greater numbers and unprecedented diversity. Deliberations by school leaders and boards of education were quickly augmented, and largely supplanted by, the arguments of university presidents, industrialists, labor union leaders, and social scientists. Controversies centered on

Author's note: The material in this chapter is more fully explored in *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality* (New Haven: Yale University Press. 1985).

the nature of human abilities and the proper functions of sch<x>ling. Then, as now, the schooling debate was as much social as educational. The search for instructional strategics was heavily layered with a strong sense of sch<x>!s' social responsibility. Tracking emerged as an educational response to a society in crisis.

In the following pages I argue that tracking has been both an educational and a social error. Rather than ameliorating the problems that mushrooming industrialization, urbanization, and immigration brought to turn-of-the-century schools, tracking has exacerbated the difficulties. Further, tracking forces upon schools an active role in perpetuating social, economic, and political inequalities. Tracking contributes to mediocre schooling for most secondary students and erects obstacles to the future opportunities of those least advantaged in the American social order—poor and minority children.

lb make this argument, I pursue the answers to several questions: (1) What is tracking? (2) What assumptions underlie current tracking and grouping practices? (3) What are the educational effects of tracking, and whose interests are served by them? (4) How did tracking emerge historically as the reasonable answer to student diversity? (5) What might it take for schools to reconsider their tracking practices? This critical scrutiny is made possible by bringing together years of research on tracking and data collected in *A Study of Schooling* on school practices in a national sample of schools (Goodlad 1984, Oakes 1985} It is intended to reopen the debate and to provoke among educators serious reconsideration of tracking as a socially and educationally responsible school practice.

What Is Tracking?

Tracking separates students into high ability, average ability, and low-ability classes; into academic, college preparatory, general, and vocational curriculums. Often students are grouped according to their scores on aptitude or achievement tests. Usually teachers' and counselors' estimates of what students have already learned and their prediaions of how much they are likely to learn in the future help determine what group students are in. Often, in senior high school, students are placed in groups depending on their post-secondary destination—what the school expects them to do in the future. Sometimes senior high students themselves are asked to help decide which groups they will be in.

Many schools claim they don't track students, but it's a rare school that has no mechanism for sorting students for instruction. In *A Stud)' of Schooling,* 37 of the 38 schools we studied tracked students for instruction in at least some subjects (Goodlad 1984) At the elementary level, we found that students are nearly always separated for instruction in what are considered the

most important .subjects—reading and mathematics. In the elementary schools we studied this was most often accomplished by within-class ability grouping, but many of the schools assigned students by ability to separate classrooms and different teachers, either for part or all of the day At the secondary level we found two forms of tracking predominated. One form (typically at senior high schools) was the division of the total school program into college preparatory (academic), general, and vocational curriculum tracks. A second form (found both at junior high/middle schools and senior highs) was academic tracking—the division of academic subject areas into levels for students of different abilities. All but one of the secondary schools in *A Study of Schooling* divided one or more of their academic subjects into levels; at several schools this system overlapped the college-prep/general/ vocational curriculum tracks.

The inflexibility in scheduling also creates unplanned tracking in many schools. Subjects like art and home economics often become low-track classes because college-preparatory students rarely have time to take them; certain required classes intended to be heterogeneous like driver training, health, or physical education sometimes become tracked because students' track requirements keep them together for most or all of the day (Oakes 1985).

However it's done, tracking has common and predictable characteristics:

1. Students' intellectual performance is judged, and these judgments are the basis of group placements.

2. Classes and tracks are labeled in terms of the performance levels of the students in them—advanced math, remedial English, college-prep track, and so on. (Even those course names that employ euphemisms clearly convey the degree of performance expected—basic science, consumer math, communication skills, general track.) These labels are used quite publicly.

3. The groups that are formed are not merely a collection of different but equally valued instructional groups. They form a hierarchy in schools. Occasional defensive responses and the appearance of special privilege for slower students—smaller classes and instructional aides, for example—rarely mask the fact that the brightest groups of students are the ones most preferred by the school. We have only to look at how teachers jockey for assignment to the top tracks.

4. Students come to be globally identified and valued by their teachers and their peers in terms of their groups. Students in high-achieving groups becomes known as high-achieving people, bright people, smart people. Often called the best students, top students, and good students, their value at school is clear. Students in slow-achieving groups suffer a less fortunate fate. They become seen as slow people, disabled people, and, among the less careful, dummies, sweathogs, and yahoos, to name just a few of the frequently heard epithets. Their value is also clear.

5. Based on their group assignments and the accompanying expectations lor school performance, students at various track levels experience schools very differently

What Assumptions Underlie Tracking?

On the most obvious and conscious level, most schools track students because they believe it is best for them. Tracking, like most school practices, is a well-intentioned effort to act on knowledge about student aptitude and instructional practice. Most educators would find it unconscionable to track for any other reason. But, like a number of school practices, tracking appears to be one of those well-intentioned practices based not so much on *knowledge* about teaching and student learning, but on taken-for-granted assumptions. These assumptions are rarely subjected to critical scrutiny if, in fact, they are ever questioned at all.

What are the assumptions underlying tracking? First, and clearly most important, school practitioners generally assume that tracking promotes students' achievement—that all students will have academic needs met best when they are learning in groups of students with similar capabilities or prior achievement. Fundamental views of human capabilities underlie this assumption, including the belief that students' capacities to master school work are so disparate that they require different and separate schooling experiences.

The extreme position contends that some students, in fact, just can't learn. Grouping is seen as the only appropriate means to accommodate these differences. That slow or less capable students will suffer emotional as well as educational damage from daily contact with brighter peers is a second assumption underlying tracking. Lowered self-concepts and negative attitudes toward learning are widely considered consequences of mixed-ability grouping for slower learners. Also widely held is the assumption that group placements can be made both accurately and fairly. And finally, most teachers and administrators contend that homogeneous grouping greatly eases the teaching task. This assumption is grounded in the belief that when groups are formed the range of differences among students is narrowed sufficiently to permit whole-class instruction organized around a common set of learning objectives, a single teaching strategy, common learning tasks, and universally applied criteria for success and rewards.

Little evidence exists to support any of these assumptions. A great many studies have been conducted into the effects of tracking and student learning. Despite many inconsistencies in the work (and, frankly, the poor quality of some of it), taken together little support emerges for the relationship between tracking and achievement (Calfee and Brown 1979, Esposito 1973, Findlay and Bryan 1971, Froman 1981, NEA 1968, Persell 1977, Rosenbaum

19H0). The separation of students into homogeneous groups does not appear to consistently enhance the academic achievement of students. In fact, for students identified as average and slow, tracking often appears to retard academic progress. One study, in fact, has found lowered I Q. scores of low-track senior-high school students related to their track placement (Rosenbaum 1976). It is certainly likely, however, that students placed in high tracks year after year experience some benefits from their considerable school advantages.

Neither does research support the assumption that slow students will suffer emotional strains when enrolled in mixed-ability classes. In fact, the opposite has often been found to result. Rather than helping students to feel more comfortable about themselves, the tracking process seems to foster *lowered* self-esteem, *lowered* aspirations, and negative attitudes toward school (Alexander and McDill 1976, Esposito 1973, Rosenbaum 19H1). Some studies have concluded that tracking leads these students to school misbehavior, and eventually to dropping out altogether (Schafer and Olexa 1971).

For evidence about the assumption that tracking decisions can be made fairly and accurately, it is necessary to look at the fairness and accuracy of the placement criteria that are used. Both test scores and teacher recommendations are assumed to reflect individual academic merit. The students who end up in top groups are those who prove worthy. Standardized achievement and ability test scores, however, tell far more about the *relative* differences among students than about *absolute* or necessarily *important* differences.

Tests are constructed to eliminate material all students know The statistical properties of the bell-shaped curve predetermine that at least half of the children will be "below average." Tests often exaggerate the real differences among people for purposes of comparison. This is frequently useful, particularly for identifying students with extreme deficiencies. However, tests typically measure only a narrow range of students' knowledge and skill; most measure only low-level intellectual processes. Few tests tell anything about how children think and solve problems or about how inventive they might be. Unfortunately, these characteristics of tests play a central role in perpetuating our beliefs about the vast differences among students. Too often, test-score differences are interpreted as large, absolute differences that demand large *education* differences. In fact, this interpretation is often inaccurate.

Perhaps more serious is the fact that both test scores and recommendations have social consequences. No matter how fair test developers and administrators try to be, it is white, middle-class and upper-middle-class children who consistently score well on tests and who are most often seen as able learners by teachers and school counselors. Both test scores and recommendadons result in the disproportionate labeling of poor children and black and Hispanic children as less capable, and that leads to their placement in groups for slow learners.

This result assumes special significance when tests and recommendations are used to estimate innate capabilities. We could judge these tests as fair and accurate only if poor and minority youngsters were, in fact, less innately capable than middle- and upper-middle-class whites. That is not the case Even so, we might think of these track placements as fair *if* low-track place merit served to remediate the educational deficiencies of poor and minority students and prepared them for success in higher tracks. This rarely happens.

The matter of choice further complicates the question of fairness in track placement. Often high school students and their parents are asked to select their post-secondary destination track—college-preparatory, general, or vocational. How could placements be unfair if students and their parents have made decisions themselves? Although these chorees are made by students, they are not free of influence. They are informed by the school judgments and placements made over eight years of schooling, by test scores and teacher recommendations. By the time they reach senior high, students know, all too well, their place in the school hierarchy. Their choices are no more fair or accurate than the earlier choices made for them. Besides, since low-track placements do *not* lead to equally valued life outcomes, there may be an ethical question of *allowing* a student to make such a poor choice with such great consequences.

The fourth assumption, that teaching is made easier by tracking, makes sense only if tracks resulted in truly homogeneous groups. In fact, they do not. Even within tracks, student variability in learning speed and style, interest, effort, and aptitude for various cognitive tasks is often considerable. Tracking often masks the fact that instruction for any group of 20 to 35 people requires providing considerable variety in instructional strategies, tasks, materials, feedback and guidance, and multiple criteria for success and rewards. Unfortunately, for many schools and teachers, tracking is used to avoid these instructional realities. When instruction fails, the problem is too often assigned to the child. The fact that tracking *does* make teaching easier for some teachers should not obscure the *best* teaching of *any* groups of students—high, average, or low.

What Are the Schooling Effects of Tracking?

Tracking students does *not* accomplish what educators intend. Between intentions and effects, there exists a substantial gulf—a gulf not often recognized or examined. Good intentions characterize the rhetoric of schooling; the less-admirable effects reflect day-to-day differences in experiences of students in various tracks. It is to those differences we now turn.

In *A Study of Schooling* we wanted to find out about the content and processes in tracked classrooms (Goodlad 1984, Oakes 1985). We wanted to

gather .specific information about what students were being taught, how [cachets carried out instruction, what classroom relationships were like, and how involved in learning students seemed to be. By studying tracked classes themselves, we hoped we might begin to explain why tracking has the effects that it does and how practitioners' good intentions for students have such negative consequences..

To discover how track levels were alike and different, we selected a representative group of classes at each level. We settled on nearly 300 English and mathematics classes at 25 secondary schools. The classes represented (in relatively equal numbers) high, average, and low tracks, and heterogeneous classes. We used several sources of information about these English and math classes; teachers and students completed extensive questionnaires; teachers were interviewed; and teachers put together packages of materials for us about their classes, including lists of the topics and skill they taught, the textbooks they used, and the ways they evaluated student learning. Many teachers included samples of their lesson plans, worksheets, and tests. Trained observers sat in all of the classrooms recording what students and teachers were doing, including their interactions.

In all three areas we studied—curriculum content, instructional quality, and classroom climate—we found remarkable and disturbing differences among the classes at different track levels. There were differences in' (1) students' access to knowledge, (2) their classroom instructional opportunities, and (3) their classroom climates.

Access to Knowledge. In the area of content, we found considerable differences in the kinds of knowledge students had access to and in the intellectual processes they had opportunities to develop. For example, students in high-track English classes were exposed to content that might be called "high-status knowledge." It was knowledge that is required for use in college. High-track students studied standard works of literature, both classic and modern. They studied the characteristics of literary genre and analyzed literary elements. These students were expected to do a great deal of expository writing, both thematic essays and reports based on library research. They learned the vocabulary that would boost their scores on college entrance exams, To the extent that students were expected to do critical thinking and problem solving, it was high-track students who had such opportunities (although we found too little critical thinking everywhere).

Low-track English classes, on the other hand, rarely, if ever, encountered these kinds of knowledge, nor were they expected to learn these skills. Prominent in low-track classes was the teaching of reading skills, generally by means of workbooks, kits, and "young adult" fiction. They wrote simple paragraphs, completed worksheets on language usage, and practiced filling out job applications and other forms. Their learning tasks were either memorization or required low-level comprehension.

The differences in mathematics content followed much the same pattern High-track classes focused primarily on math concepts, low track on basic computational skills and math facts.

These differences in knowledge access have important social and educational consequences for students. Much of the curriculum of low track classes was likely to "I<xk" students out because it was taught at the expense of other important concepts and skills. Since so much was omitted from their curriculum, these students were denied the knowledge that would allow them to move into higher track classes or to be successful if they got there. These kinds of locking-out differences were noticed in some middle schools as early as 6th grade.

Opportunities to Learn. We also looked carefully at two classroom conditions that can powerfully influence how much students will learn: instructional time and teaching quality. The marked differences we found across our data led us to conclude that students in higher tracks were provided greater opportunities to learn than students in low tracks. For example, all of our data on classroom time led to the same conclusion: Students in high tracks get more; students in low tracks get less. Teachers of high-track classes set aside more class time for learning; and more actual class time was observed to be spent on learning activities. High-track students were expected to spend more time doing homework. Fewer high-track students were observed to be off-task. More of them reported that learning took up most of their class time, rather than behavioral problems, socializing, or non-instructional class routines.

The instructional environments of high-track classes were more often characterized by a whole set of teacher behaviors likely to enable learning. High-track teachers were more enthusiastic, and their instruction was clearer. They used strong criticism or ridicule less frequently than did teachers of low-track classes. Classroom tasks were more highly organized and of a greater variety in high-track classes, and grades were more relevant to student learning.

These differences in learning opportunities portray a fundamental schooling irony: Those students who need more time to learn appear to be getting less; those students who have the most difficulty learning are least exposed to the sort of high-quality instruction that seems to best facilitate learning.

Classroom Climate. We were interested in studying classroom climates at various track levels because we were convinced that warm and positive feelings in class are more than just a nice accompaniment to learning. We were convinced that when trusting relationships exist among teachers and students in classrooms, time and energy are freed up for learning. Where these relationships do not exist, students spend a great deal of time and energy establishing less productive relationships with others and interfering with the teachers instructional agenda. In those classrooms, less learning is likely to occur.

The data about the *Study of Schooling c*lassrooms permitted us to investigate three important aspects of classroom climate: relationships between teachers and students, relationships among the students themselves, and the intensity of student involvement. And once again, we saw a distressing pattern of advantages for high track classes, disadvantages for low

In high-track classes students saw their teachers as more concerned about them and less punitive. Teachers spent less time on student behavior problems and encouraged their students to become independent, questioning, and critical thinkers. In low-track classes teachers were seen as less concerned and more punitive. They emphasized matters of discipline and behavior. Teachers of low-track classes often mentioned such things as "following directions," "respecting my position," "punctuality," and "take a directive order" as among the five most important things they wanted their class to learn during the year.

Similar differences were found in the relationship students established with each other in class. Students in low-track classes were far more likely to report that, "Students in this class are unfriendly to me," or, "I often feel left out of class activities." They reported high levels of disruption and arguing in class. Generally, they seemed to like each other less than did students in high-track classes. Not surprisingly, given the differences in relationships, students in high-track classes appeared to be much more involved in their classwork. Students in low-track classes were more apathetic, reporting more often that they didn't care about what went on, and that failing wouldn't bother most of the students in their class.

Once again, our data on classroom climate in various track levels revealed a pattern of classroom experiences that seems to enhance the learning possibilities for those students already disposed to do well. Correspondingly, we saw even more clearly a pattern likely to inhibit the learning of those at the bottom. Again, we found that those who needed most help got the least.

These data show clear instructional advantages for high-achieving students, and clear disadvantages for low. The quality of the average students experiences fell between these two extremes, although they were usually more like those of students in high tracks than low. Taken together, the findings begin to suggest why students in low-track classes are likely to suffer because of their placements. It would be a serious mistake to attribute these differences to consciously mean-spirited actions by school practitioners. Obviously, what teachers decide to teach and the type of instruction they provide are greatly influenced by the students they interact with. It is unlikely that students are passive participants in the tracking processes. Undoubtedly, their self-perceptions, attitudes, interests, and behaviors help produce tracking effects. Thus groups of students who, by standards of conventional wisdom, seem to behave as if they are less able and eager to learn are very likely to affect a teachers willingness or even ability to provide the best possible learning opportunities.

Finally, consider the obvious conclusion: Students who are exposed to less content and lower teaching quality will not have their academic achievement enhanced. This is exactly what happens when low-achieving students are grouped together tor instruction. These data show a frightening pattern of curricular inequalities. While such patterns are disturbing under any circumstances, they become particularly so given the prevailing pattern of student placements: disproportionate percentages of poor and minority students in the low track classes. A self-fulfilling prophecy can be seen to work *institutionally*. Tracking is a school structure that teaches and reinforces that those not defined as the best are *expected* to do less well. Few students and teachers can defy those expectations.

Added to the day-to-day differences that students experience are the long-term consequences of tracking. Tracks are very inflexible, even when school practitioners do not intend them to be. Students rarely move from one track to another, and when they do it's most often to a lower track. The data on the content students are exposed to helps explain this. Children who are placed in low groups early in elementary school are most likely to be placed in low-ability classes in junior high. Low-track students in junior high are nearly always placed in noncollege-preparatory tracks in high school. The net effect of tracking is that students identified as having the greatest educational difficulty can experience a decidedly lower quality of education for their entire school careers. The effects don't end with schooling. Students in high tracks have substantial educational, .social. and economic advantages as adults. These effects have serious implications in terms of race and class, since poor and minority children suffer these consequences in disproportionate numbers.

A reasonable question at this point is whether these differences in classroom experiences are inevitable. Fortunately, 73 of the mathematics and English classes we studied were heterogeneous, or mixed-track classes. What we found in these classes led us to some hopeful speculations about alternatives to the negative consequences of tracking. We found that 70 percent of these classes were exposed to knowledge that was quite similar to that of high-track classes. In the quality of their classroom learning opportunities—time for learning and teaching quality—heterogeneous classes were considerably more advantaged than low tracks. Further, in 86 percent of the classes that mixed slow students with others, markedly more positive relationships among teachers and students were found. Fifty-six percent of these mixed classes were among the group of classes reporting the friendliest relationships among peers; nearly all of the others were very much like average-track classes—generally quite positive places to be.

These data about heterogeneous classrooms should not lead us to believe that all would be solved by simply mixing students up and leaving everything else in schools the same. That is an unlikely scenario: Neither would it be likely to be effective. What these data provide is a hypothesis that

school reorganization featuring a common curriculum and classroom heterogeneity might equalize students' school experiences in several important ways These data provide evidence that curricular inequality is not inevitable.

How Did Tracking Become Common Practice?

In tracking systems we can observe troublesome cycles that do not appear to be inevitable, patterns that run counter to the best intentions of school practitioners. Understanding why tracking profoundly shapes American secondary schools requires historical inquiry.

Tracking emerged as the central organizational principle of secondary schools with the expansion of free secondary education at the turn of the century. It resulted from the triumph of particular beliefs about students and schools. These beliefs emerged from the interaction of events such as immigration, urbanization, and new social thought (social Darwinism and scientific management, for example).

Vie Ideology of Individual Differences. The intellectual, moral, and even biological differences among turn-of-the-century adolescents were thought to be vast and immutable. A misguided social Darwinism posited that darker-skinned, recently arrived immigrant youth were on a fundamentally lower rung of the evolutionary ladder. Consequently, potential for school learning was seen to differ enormously among students from different social and ethnic groups. Therefore, the curriculum suitable for a more advanced group (white, native-stock, Protestants, for the most part) was seen as entirely inappropriate for those of lesser capabilities (predominantly immigrants from southern and eastern Europe) Lewis Terman wrote, for example, "Their dullness seems to be racial.. . . Children of this group should be segregated in special classes.. . . They cannot master abstractions, but they can often be made efficient workers" (Terman 1923, p. 28) These views did not go uncontested, but the emerging organizational pattern—tracking—clearly reflected their acceptance.

Schooling Purposes. Terman's statement also supported the emerging belief that a critical role of public secondary schooling was to prepare and certify students for work. For the first time, students who would not become scholars, professionals, or gentlemen were attending secondary schools. The traditional academic curriculum seemed a mismatch, particularly for immigrant youth. Industrial employers needed immigrants socialized with the work habits and attitudes required to "fit in" as factory workers (proper deportment, punctuality, willingness to be supervised and managed) and with technical skills. These requirements of industry coincided with the curricular vacuum in schools. The curriculum was differentiated with tracks leading to further education for some, industrial work for others. One school admin-

istrator wrote, "We can picture the educational system is having a very important function as a selecting agency, a means of selecting the men of best intelligence from the deficient and mediocre" (Pillsbury 1921, p. 71)

Democratic Education Ellwood Cubberly wrote in 1909, "Our city schools will soon be forced to give up the exceedingly democratic idea that all are equal, and our society devoid of classes. . . . and to begin a specialization of educational effort along many lines in an attempt to adapt the school to the needs of these many classes. . . ." (Cubberly 1909, pp. 15-16). But the prevailing response, although consistent with Cubberly's prescription, was more reflective of American values of fairness and opportunity. Tracking was seen as a way to incorporate student differences and the sorting function of schools in a new, democratic form.

In 1908 the superintendent of Boston schools articulated this shift: "Until very recently [the schools) have offered equal opportunity for all to receive *one kind* of education, but what will make them democratic is to provide opportunity for all to receive education as will fit them *equally* well for their particular life work" (Boston Schools 1908} The problem of educating diverse groups of students, compounded by beliefs about racial and ethnic differences, had been met with a solution that relied on a newly coined view of democracy. The rich and intriguing history, barely touched on here, provides the context for understanding why tracked schools made sense to policymakers and practitioners.

Few practitioners today would talk about students and schooling in quite these terms. Yet, in attempting to understand the persistence of tracking in contemporary schools, critical questions must be raised about the extent to which turn-of-the-century purposes and beliefs continue to guide school practice and about the degree to which these beliefs still make sense to practitioners and policymakers (see Oakes in press). Until the assumptions underlying them are subject to inquiry, we will know little about how track structures, placements, processes, and effects operate in today's schools.

Can Schools Reconsider Tracking?

School practitioners seem to support tracking because they are convinced that, considering the trade-offs, tracking is best for students. The expressed intention of adults in schools is to provide experiences that maximize student learning and enhance positive self-perceptions, attitudes, and aspirations. Practitioners believe tracking facilitates these outcomes under conditions of equal educational opportunity. While the empirical evidence suggests a substantial gap between these intentions and the effects of tracking, the dilemma is that well-intentioned, hard-working, good people appear locked into a school structure that is contradictory to the expressed goals of

schooling This is surely a testimony to the power and complexity of the contextual conditions of tracking.

Typically, practitioners respond to empirical findings on tracking with ambivalence. The negative processes and outcomes for low track students are almost universally re-cognized and lamented. Conclusions that able students will likely continue to do well even if they are placed in heterogeneous groups are almost universally distrusted. Research conclusions such as these conflict with their experiences. The feared negative effects of mixed-abilitv grouping on the achievement of the highest-achieving students are understandable because, under typical tracking systems, clear school advantages do accrue to these students. Research findings that high-achieving students can learn equally well in heterogeneous settings simply don't account for the noticeable, concrete advantages that practitioners, students, and parents can see high-track students receiving in schools.

The point is that, where tracking exists, the top tracks offer more to the students in them; it is difficult to give up that particular bird in hand" for promises that these students would do "no worse" if tracking were stopped. Additionally, since parents and teachers of high-track students often comprise the most visible, vocal, and respected school constituencies, the concerns for "all the others" who might benefit are not so fully represented.

Much practical concern centers on the perceived near-impossibility of teaching classes with a wide range of student ability. Maintaining the current secondary school curriculum while accommodating this range is mind-boggling to practitioners already struggling with too many students and ever-increasing expectations. Few practitioners have had extended experiences teaching heterogeneous groups, and they cannot imagine mixing what they know to be two or three distinctly different groups of students and maintaining the high quality of instruction they see high-ability groups now receiving.

Unfortunately, there are no easy answers, quick fixes, or staff-development programs ready to cure tracking problems in schools. There *are* promising concepts and strategies for working with heterogeneous groups, including mastery learning (Bloom 1981) and cooperative small-group learning (Slavin 1983), to name just two. But teaching strategies are only one small piece of the assumptions and practices that lock schools into tracking. Seriously considering de-tracking our schools requires dramatically altered assumptions about students, learning, and schools.

Just as tracking assumes that some students can't or won't learn, successful heterogeneity requires the belief that all students can and will. Just as tracking is the logical organization for curriculum built around small sequential segments of skill-based learning, de-tracking probably requires curriculums re-conceptualized around organizing concepts and themes. Just as tracking is central to a system prepared to separate winners and losers, to sort and certify students for their adult lives, so schools without tracking must focus on

educational aims, aims to be achieved by all children. Tracking can be reconsidered, hut it will require rethinking much of what now happens in school

The Research and Practice We Need

Asking practitioners to rethink tracking is asking them to virtually reconceptualize all secondary school processes and to entertain the possibility that they work in settings that are contrary to their noblest objectives. Serious thought about reforming tracking practices requires an understanding of both its centrality and complexity.

There is much yet to be learned about how and why teachers decide to conduct instruction in various tracks as they do. Undoubtedly, they are influenced by history and tradition, by school and district guidelines, by standards of common practice, and by perceptions of students* abilities and limitations. But how these influences translate into track-level differences is not clear. There is much to be learned about how students' backgrounds, motivations, peer-group influences, and track labels interact with their curriculum and instructional opportunities to produce track-level differences in achievement and attitudes.

These are appropriate questions for educational research. They are also the very questions that must guide practitioners in their day-to-day conduct of schooling. The issues that underlie school tracking are laden with values, history, and politics; they go far beyond matters of pedagogy' and human learning. Empirical research am and increasingly will shed light on tracking processes and effects, and research is likely to generate practical alternatives.

This knowledge is essential. But critical reflection and thoughtful dialogue among practitioners is the necessary precursor to a serious reconsideration or reconstruction of school practice. The historical circumstances and beliefs, the assumptions about students' abilities and the role of schooling, and the standards of common practice that ground tracking, particularly those linked to race and class, must be examined for their relevance to contemporary school events and beliefs. Only when professional educators bring human history and human concerns together with research and theory, can tracking considerations extend beyond the frustrating "Does it work?" question to include issues of "Toward what ends?" and "In whose interests?"

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