



Classroom Detracking in the US

Examples for School
Leadership

Margaret Thornton

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For my grandfather

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CHAPTER 1

“What kid likes to read?!”: Understanding How and Why Students Are Sorted

When I was a brand new high school English teacher, I was very excited to offer my students silent, sustained reading time, or SSR. When I was in high school, I would have *loved* time to just read whatever I wanted. My students, many of whom were reluctant readers, were not as enthused as I had imagined. One young man went so far as to ask me very earnestly “What kid likes to read?!” This, of course, broke my heart, not just because I had liked to read as a kid but also because the students in the honors class after his cherished their SSR time as much as I had imagined all my students would. How could kids in the same grade in the same school have such different ideas about acceptable academic pursuits? And as for those who assured me that no kids actually liked to read, who had turned off the curiosity switches we’re all born with firmly in the on position? These questions led me to wonder about how we separate kids into classes and if those separations were perhaps doing more harm than good. At my next school, I could identify the level of a class simply by noticing the color of the skin of the students in in that classroom. I was presented with a choice: I could believe there was something inherently different between these groups of students in terms of their academic interest or I could try to determine if there are systemic factors in place that led to students’ access to challenging and interesting curriculum and instruction being determined by their skin color. I choose the latter, and this choice led me to study the history of how students are sorted into courses in high school.

For much of the history of high schools in the United States, students have been separated into courses based on their supposed achievement levels as determined by teachers, school counselors, administrators, and sometimes parents. Unsurprisingly, these course sortings have often reflected students' racial and socioeconomic backgrounds much more than any potentially objective achievement measurement. These groupings have created a second-generation, classroom-level segregation even within schools that may seem integrated at the building level (Brooks et al., 2013).

Since the 1980s, researchers and educators have explored detracking as an alternative to this rigid and often discriminatory practice (Burris & Welner, 2005; Tabron et al., 2021; Welner & Burris, 2006; Yonezawa et al., 2002). The work continues through to the present day, although schools are often not aware of others undertaking similar work. In its most basic form, detracking places students in the same classroom regardless of perceived previous achievement. In detracking classrooms with the best outcomes, teachers have the resources to support to students who struggle to understand the material while also creating enrichment opportunities for students who quickly learn initial lessons (Abu El-Haj & Rubin, 2009; Alvarez et al., 2006; Rubin, 2003). Students are able to learn at their own pace but within a racially and socioeconomically integrated classroom (Rubin & Noguera, 2004).

This integration matters more than ever for the United States as students confront modern-day segregation and its effects alongside attempted recovery from school building closures during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Decades of evidence have shown that integration is beneficial for students of all races even as our schools become more segregated (Reardon, 2016). As schools attempt to return to normal after COVID 19-related closures, some school leaders are likely to assume efficiency lies in separating students based on their experience during the pandemic. Nascent research suggests, however, that virtually all students would benefit from acceleration through grade level material with the appropriate tailored supports and enrichment (The New Teacher Project, 2021). School leaders and those studying school leadership need a road-map for how to create such classrooms successfully.

This book meets this need by describing four high-quality detracking programs across the United States and explaining what best practices school leaders should engage in to fully integrate their schools. Although the research underpinning the book was conducted at the beginning of

the COVID-19 pandemic, the themes and best practices continue to be applicable to school leaders in a variety of contexts. Focusing on schools in racially and socioeconomically diverse suburban and urban areas, this book will be beneficial to a wide variety of school leaders as well as school leadership researchers. Don't try to figure out where these schools are as their individual locations are not important. They could be anywhere. Nor are these schools perfect. Rather, their leaders offer readers a glimpse into school communities attempting to become more just and more academically rigorous. Readers will learn from their successes *and* their challenges.

LANGUAGE USED IN THIS BOOK

Writing about marginalized students' experiences as a person belonging to several dominant groups doing the marginalizing is always difficult. Language to describe students' racialized and socioeconomic experiences often feels inadequate. Phrases such as marginalized, minoritized, or historically oppressed seem to let the oppressors off the hook by not mentioning *who* is doing the oppressing. Naming the oppressors, however, can become unwieldy because the list is long enough to fill a book on its own. With these issues in mind, I have decided to use the terms used either by my interviewees or the data collectors at the state and national level. I did so for simplicity's sake and do not suggest that these terms are neutral or even preferable. Language is always evolving, and we are all constantly learning how to better describe the experiences of students whom educators have too often written off as not capable.

Discussing students' socioeconomic backgrounds and their relationship to educational outcomes is similarly fraught for researchers and practitioners who desire accuracy. For many decades, researchers have used participation rates in the federal free and reduced lunch program to determine levels of poverty at schools. These rates, however, are blunt rather than precise instruments. Free and reduced price lunch rates do not accurately capture variation in income levels at home (Domina et al., 2018) nor do they account for other protective factors students receiving free or reduced price lunch may experience or the fact that eligible families may not enroll in the program (Data Quality Campaign, 2022). Some schools have also taken advantage of changes in the community eligibility provision to give free meals to all students, thus further muddying the waters of what this classification can tell us (Koedel & Parsons, 2021). During the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, all public school children in the United

States were eligible for free lunches. Despite these limitations, free and reduced price lunch data continues to be the most readily available proxy for students living in poverty and the only one available across all four of the schools I examine. Thus, I use this data throughout the book to partially describe the demographics of the respective student bodies I discuss, but I do so knowing it is a blunt instrument which needs to be refined to better understand the experiences of the roughly ten million children living in poverty in the United States (Children’s Defense Fund, 2021).

These issues may seem like distinctions without differences, but in studying student access to higher-level courses, describing students’ racialized and socioeconomic experiences as accurately as possible is of the utmost importance. Along with English language and immigration status, these experiences have largely defined how students are placed in courses for much of the twentieth century.

UNDERSTANDING TRACKING AND DETRACKING

Tracking is the policy of sorting students by academic ability (Oakes, 2005). Exactly who defines student ability and sorts students varies from school to school, but tracking often breaks down along lines of race and socioeconomic background rather than students’ actual abilities in a given subject (Burriss, 2014; Giersch, 2018; Legette & Kurtz-Costes, 2020; Oakes, 2005; Wronowski et al., 2022). Understanding the historical context of tracking can help place the policy in appropriate conversation with school leaders’ attempts to undo the mismatch of student ability and student class placement (Chambers, 2009; Donaldson et al., 2017; Modica, 2015; Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Watanabe, 2007).

Tracking first became popular with the advent of the modern high school in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Tyack, 1974). These tracks were quite rigid and typically divided students into two groups: those with college aspirations and those who would go on to learn a trade. Following the Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board*, many school divisions often used tracking within schools as a way to separate students of color from White students (McCardle, 2020; Oakes, 2005). Tracking can exist by separating students into vocational and college-preparatory schools (Lewis & Cheng, 2006), individual class levels within schools (Chmielewski et al., 2013) or grouping students by ability within the classroom—more commonly known as ability grouping (Clarke et al., 2003). Regardless of the method, educators implementing tracking seem