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Detracking in the Social Studies: A Path to a More Democratic Education?

This article examines the practices of tracking and detracking in the social studies classroom. I argue that the content goals and the pedagogical orientations of social studies classes lend themselves to detracking. First I describe some of the issues regarding tracking and detracking in general. Following that is a discussion of the match between the social studies goals of democracy, inquiry, and civic participation and the goals of detracking. I then argue that the pedagogical practices recommended for teaching social studies are also those utilized in successful detracked classrooms. Finally, I discuss some of the challenges to detracking in the social studies.

THE SOCIAL STUDIES ARE an appealing target for detracking for ideological and pedagogical reasons. Social studies as a field addresses is-

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sues of democracy, equality, citizenship, and social justice. The aim of detracking to provide more equitable opportunities for students from all race and class backgrounds is consistent with the historical commitment of the social studies to a vital democracy dependent on the education and participation of all of its citizens. As such, it is critical to consider the tracking debate in light of the purposes of education in general and the goals of social studies in particular. Social studies educators have long been concerned with ability grouping. In fact, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), the premiere professional organization for social studies educators in the United States, publicly stated their support for detracked social studies classrooms in this 1992 statement:

National Council for the Social Studies opposes ability grouping in social studies. Research on ability grouping generally indicates that this common educational practice works against democratic egalitarian norms, leads to maldistribution of racial and ethnic groups in lower tracks, hinders the progress of low-ability groups by providing an inferior education, is destructive to student self-esteem, and fails to offer students worthwhile educational benefits to compensate for its negative effects. (NCSS, 1992)

In this article, I consider the arguments for and against detracking and then argue that the social studies classroom is an ideal place to begin the process of detracking for philosophical, political, and practical reasons. I explore the ways that school and social studies classrooms should be adapted for detracking. Finally, I describe potential pitfalls and limitations facing teachers and students in detracked social studies classrooms.

The Tracking–Detracking Debate

The tracking–detracking debates center on two broad issues: educational equality and students' cognitive outcomes. That is, who benefits from tracking? Who is disadvantaged by it? What are the learning outcomes of detracking for high and low achievers?

It is widely acknowledged within tracking–detracking research that schools with racially diverse student populations essentially re-create a segregated schooling experience for students. Lower track classes are populated primarily by low-income and Black and Latina or Latino students, whereas upper track classes are populated by mainly White and middle-class students (Hallinan, 1994; Loveless, 1999; Wells & Oakes, 1996). This racial and class-based imbalance in the kinds of education that students receive has led many researchers to the conclusion that tracking structures inequality and limits the opportunities of students who, they argue, receive watered-down curriculum and pedagogy (Oakes, 1985; Oakes, Wells, & Jones, 1997; Wheelock, 1992). The students who are disadvantaged by tracking are those with the least social capital and most limited opportunity structures to begin with. Tracking, it is argued, exacerbates their already limited life chances by limiting their knowledge and opportunities for academic success. That tracking stands in the way of equal educational opportunity seems logical and certainly the demographics of tracked classes function to contribute to the ideology that intelligence is somehow linked to race and culture (Oakes et al., 1997).

Detracking advocates have argued that students placed in low-track classes are at an educational

disadvantage that could be ameliorated by detracking and creating heterogeneous classes with an enriched curriculum. Opponents of detracking argue that the policy and practice would limit the educational experience and outcomes of those students who are academically superior. There is research to support the position that low-tracked students would have better outcomes in heterogeneous classes. Hallinan's (1994) work indicates that students in low tracks exhibit slower academic growth than if they had been placed in heterogeneous classes. Likewise, Argys, Rees, and Brewer (1996) found that when low-tracked 10th-grade math students were placed in heterogeneous classes, their achievement test scores went up an average of 5 percentage points. However, their study also revealed that students who had previously been in high-track classes lost 2 percentage points on achievement tests. This is at the heart of the student-outcome debate: Do high-track students lose when classes are detracked? The research on this question is mixed. The consequences of detracking continue to engender much debate as to whether or not detracking equalizes the educational experiences and opportunities for low-income and Black and Latina or Latino students in low-track classes, or whether detracking diminishes the educational experience for high-achieving students (Evans, 1996; Hallinan, 1994; Loveless, 1999).

As this debate rages on, it is important to note that very little research has been done specifically in detracked social studies classrooms. The following studies are among the few that I was able to locate. Klinger, Vaughn, and Schumm (1998) studied students placed in heterogeneous groups for reading instruction using a social studies text. Through intervention with specific reading strategies, the students demonstrated gains in reading comprehension, but no measurable gains in social studies content knowledge. Cooper (1999) described the detracking of the ninth-grade English/history core at Liberty High School. These efforts resulted in students expressing greater enjoyment and engagement in their English and history core classes. Rothenberg, McDermott, and Martin (1998) described the efforts of school detracking in science and social studies and found

that teachers were more student-centered, had more interactive classes, utilized better questioning and critical thinking strategies, and expressed more enjoyment of the teaching and learning process. They found that students who were previously in low-tracked classes demonstrated academic improvement and those who had been in the higher tracks exhibited no significant change. Finally, Weintraub (1997) described her own success in teaching a detracked, 10th-grade global studies class emphasizing the growth in all of her students. However, Rubin's (2003) study of a detracked ninth-grade program at a diverse urban high school found that in spite of the efforts of progressive teachers in detracked English and social studies classrooms, students' social preferences sometimes reified the very inequities that the teachers were trying to redress through their use of cooperative and inquiry learning.

The dearth of research on the effects of tracking in the social studies is partnered with a gap in our understanding of the potential benefits and pitfalls of detracking in that subject area. In the next sections I argue that social studies is the subject that is ideologically and pedagogically consistent with the goals of detracking. The goals and content of social studies are concerned with equity and justice and, as such, heterogeneous grouping in social studies would likely benefit all students and meet the goals of the discipline. In later sections, I examine the ways in which the social studies are pedagogically well suited for detracking and discuss possible pitfalls of detracking in social studies.

Why Detrack in Social Studies?

Social studies is a field rife with debate about its intentions, purposes, and origins (Ross, 2001b). In general the curricular content is heavily rooted in historical study. However, the social welfare origins of the social studies are clearly visible in the curriculum standards outlined by the NCSS, which defines social studies as:

the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence The pri-

mary purpose of the social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world. (NCSS, 1994)

This definition is open to a variety of interpretations. Stanley and Nelson (1994) provided a compelling description of three major, yet nonexclusive categories of thought in the field of social studies today: subject centered, civics centered, and issues centered. Within each of these three strands exists an array of views, ranging from the more conservative conception of social studies as transmitter of cultural traditions to a more activist view of social studies as aimed at fostering social action. Parker (2001) clarified this apparent dichotomy by explaining that while activist approaches seek to engage students in the activity of democratic politics, advocates of transmission approaches do not see participation as an end to itself. They view content knowledge and critical consciousness as essential to make informed decisions about the kinds of action one might take. In spite of these debates, it is agreed that social studies is the central location for one of the primary purposes of schooling—that of socializing American youth into becoming knowledgeable, critical, and active democratic citizens.

As social studies educators consider how society socializes American youth, members of the social studies community consider the impact of tracking on that socialization. Parker (2001) argued that within the socialization process in social studies education “students must come to understand liberty, pluralism, citizen rights and responsibilities, and the rule of law. Further, they must come to abhor demagoguery, discrimination, oppression, and military rule” (p. 6). Considering the racial and class-based segregation supported by tracking, the social studies community must consider the effects of that particular grouping structure on how well youth are prepared for a pluralistic society that abhors oppression and discrimination.

American society (as well as popular American history) perpetuates an ideology of equality and meritocracy, yet is mired in a reality of extreme in-

equality in terms of education and ability to participate in citizenship. Parker (2001) argued that "poverty is a barrier to free exchange of ideas and to education" (p. 7), and that our poorest citizens are the least informed about civic structures and therefore are the least equipped to advocate for change. Likewise, social class predicts where, how, and by whom children are schooled. Therefore, the practice of tracking in social studies may make it less likely that our poorest students become well versed in civics and thereby may perpetuate and reproduce the inequality that the social studies seeks to redress. Detracked social studies classes could provide an enriched curriculum and provide low-income children access to information about how to create social change and participate in our political system.

Tracking also functions to limit civic participation among low-income students and students of color by functioning to limit the educational levels that such students might attain. Years of schooling have been found to be the chief predictive variable of citizenship knowledge, attitudes, and behavior, in terms of democratic enlightenment and political engagement (Converse, 1972; Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996). Political engagement involves being able to protect one's self-interest in politics and to influence public policy. Democratic enlightenment involves the knowledge and dispositions that allow citizens to advocate for their own rights as well as the rights of others in the interest of maintaining a pluralistic democracy. Citizens with more years of schooling report discussing, reading about, and being engaged in politics in larger proportion than their less schooled counterparts (Converse, 1972; Nie et al., 1996). As such, because tracking limits the educational opportunities for students placed in lower tracks and makes it less likely that they will either complete high school or attend college, tracking may make it less likely that students in low tracks will engage the political system and uphold the principles of democracy.

In addition to the potential for tracking to limit the opportunities for students from marginalized groups to learn and engage in the critical aspects of citizenship, which might empower them to work for social change, tracking may also limit the op-

portunities of all students to develop an understanding of the lives of students unlike themselves and participate fully in a pluralistic democracy. Sterns (2004) found that schools using academic tracking limit opportunities for interracial friendship. Her work indicates that tracking may inhibit a free flow of information among and between people of different races. This can limit opportunities for students of color to learn about White power structures (to which they may not be privy) and also limit the opportunities for White students to learn from the life experiences of students of color.

This racial segregation and lack of information exchange is particularly significant in light of the tracking debate about the effects of tracking on high academic achievers. If students are racially segregated by means of tracking for their social studies coursework, they are limited in gaining multiple perspectives on the content of social studies. Epstein's (2001) research indicates that racial identity affects how children interpret and understand historical events. Her findings indicate that Black and White children can understand events differently and interpret history and society through the lens of their own racial experience. This work suggests that heterogeneous racially mixed classes with opportunities for debate and discussion might serve to assist White students in gaining a more complex perspective on social studies and help them to think critically about historical and political events. Weintraub (1997) described the powerful effect that detracking in social studies can have for high-achieving students when she quoted one of her own detracked global studies students:

I never see these kids anywhere else except in your class. I am in all honors classes, but I learn so much from listening to them. The way they see things is quite different from the way that I do. Particularly when T. speaks, I find myself thinking so much about ideas. We have the best discussions in this room. I like the ways the kids speak. I want to be a teacher and I have learned a lot in this room from the other kids. (p. 158)

Finally, social studies educators must examine the hidden curriculum of schools, including the

policies and practices that sort and separate students. It is important to examine what Parker (2001) called the extracurricular aspects of civics education by "focus[ing] on the norms by which adults and young people in the school relate to one another and by which decisions and school and classroom policies are made" (p. 10). This hidden curriculum tells students in more powerful ways than texts can how people in a democracy should act and live. If schools segregate by tracking and sorting students, students will learn that this is the natural order of a democracy, that some students are entitled to a better education than others. Social studies educators, committed to building citizenship and democracy among students, would be well served by teaching detracked classes in an effort to model such principles.

I have outlined the rationale for detracking in social studies given the nature of the discipline, and I have alluded to some of the promises that detracking in social studies might offer for students who have previously been in low tracks as well as those who have been in high tracks. Certainly, the field of social studies would be serving its own goals by assisting students to learn about democracy and to be democratic citizens through inquiry in a diverse setting. In the following section, I outline how I see social studies as particularly well suited to the pedagogical changes necessary in heterogeneous classes.

Social Studies Teaching in the Heterogeneous Classroom

The social studies are rooted in a pedagogy of historical and social inquiry, critical analysis of social issues, and interpretation of documents. In homogeneous classes serving low-tracked students, these strategies may often be replaced by lecture and note taking. In heterogeneous classes, the mix of academic strengths necessitates the use of innovative pedagogy, which is particularly well suited to the pedagogical strategies best suited for social studies in general.

The teaching strategies seen by many educators as best suited for heterogeneous, diverse classrooms are *culturally relevant* practices (Ladson-

Billings, 1992, 1994; Rios, 1993, 1996; Villegas & Lucas, 2002), in which knowledge is created and shared among students and teachers, course content is viewed critically, teachers are passionate about their subject matter, students learn prerequisite knowledge and skills, and student diversity and individual differences are taken into account in planning and assessment. Similarly, Ross (2001a) suggested that those committed to social studies for social justice should create curricula that empower all citizens, include all, engage members in active learning in meaningful real-world activities and accommodate diverse learners, build learning support strategies, and foster collaboration within schools and with families and communities. Such pedagogical practices aimed at addressing the needs of heterogeneous groups of students are rooted in the traditions of teaching for social justice and are highly congruent with the goals of social studies as outlined by the NCSS (1994), as well as the instructional suggestions for detracked classrooms established by NCSS (1992).

In the scant research that describes the teaching practices of teachers in successfully detracked social studies classes, the pedagogical practices already described seemed evident. Rothenberg et al. (1998) found that as teachers worked with their detracked classes, they became increasingly student centered. That is, they allowed students more opportunities to work with one another and share ideas informally. This was complimented by the teachers' increased use of cooperative learning. Social studies teachers had students work together to identify the critical aspects of a good essay, develop group positions about important events in history, and develop tables outlining various nations' political positions during critical times in history. The researchers also found that students and teachers in detracked classes had more open dialogue and wider participation in discussions. These pedagogical changes lend themselves particularly well to the task of studying the social studies. The social studies require students to read and write, but first students must be able to think critically about the content and form opinions about the connections between and among events and issues. Active learning activities like coopera-

tive learning, role-plays, debates, and interpretive analysis can strengthen social studies learning.

Rubin (2003) found that the progressive goals of teachers in detracked English and social studies classes included racial integration and educational equity. The teachers that she studied hoped that students would engage in social transformation as a result of the ongoing critical reflection among a heterogeneous group of peers. These teachers used whole class and small group structures to create opportunities for students to interact across difference. They grouped students across ability levels as well as across aspects of social difference. Rubin found that these teachers were particularly aware of personalities as they grouped students and tried to include a *group-maker* (Rubin, 2003, p. 553), a student who could keep the group motivated and on task, in each group.

Weintraub (1997) stated that to reach a diverse class of learners, "I used every technique that I could think of and then some." (p. 159) She particularly focused on the racial and cultural diversity of her students and worked to help students connect social studies content to their own lives. For example, her students were asked to write a term paper about "Taking a Stand in History" because so many of her lower achieving students had a personal history of challenging authority. She then asked community members to mentor students and help them as they selected topics and developed their term papers. Such practices contain aspects of the culturally relevant approach described by Ladson-Billings (2001) and others, as well as the social studies approach advocated by Ross (2001a).

Bill Bigelow is a social studies teacher who writes often about his practice in the periodical *Rethinking Schools*. His approach to social studies directly addresses issues of social justice. He regularly asks students to consider multiple perspectives by using role-plays and interviews with others (Bigelow, Christensen, Karp, Miner, & Peterson, 1994). Such activities are well suited for heterogeneous classes in that students have the opportunity to gain the perspective of other students who are unlike themselves. Detracked classes are much more likely to be racially, linguistically, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse. Such di-

versity allows the possibility for classrooms to become a training ground for a pluralistic democracy.

The pedagogical strategies just described that are most promising in social studies also seem promising for heterogeneous, diverse groups of students. In fact, having heterogeneous groups of students may be the impetus that teachers need to teach social studies in more engaging and relevant ways. However, as I describe in the next section, pedagogical strategies and a good fit between the goals of social studies and the goals of detracking are not all that is necessary for successfully detracking social studies classrooms.

Potential Pitfalls in Detracking Social Studies

Detracking social studies makes sense in terms of content, goals, and pedagogy. However, there are numerous potential pitfalls associated with detracking social studies classes and it is important that they are presented here.

Wheelock (1992) outlined six schoolwide factors that are necessary for successful detracking: (a) developing a culture of detracking in which all stakeholders believe in the right and ability of all students to be taught with a rigorous curriculum, (b) parent involvement and buy-in that a diversity of perspectives is a positive objective, (c) professional development and support, (d) a phase-in change process, (e) flexibility among stakeholders, (f) a reconsideration of all routines and identification of ways that ability grouping and segregation permeate the school environment, and finally, (g) support for detracking on the district and state levels. If any of these areas is not in place, detracking will be less likely to succeed.

As important, if not more important, than the external support is the willingness of the teachers involved to successfully implement detracking. Oakes et al. (1997) described the ideological impediments to successful detracking rooted in the ways that Americans link race, social class, and intelligence. What theories educators draw on to make sense of the individual differences that they observe in their students will affect the success

that they have with detracked classes. It is essential that teachers examine, and engage in ongoing critical reflection about, their own assumptions regarding race, class, intelligence, and student potential. Teachers who view intelligence as fixed or derived from students' cultural backgrounds will have a difficult time teaching students who may not exhibit their intelligence in traditional ways, or who have been systematically denied access to adequate education by the school system. Therefore, it is essential that teachers who engage in detracking rigorously examine their own beliefs and be willing to challenge colleagues who exhibit cultural and racial bias in their beliefs and practices.

Other potential pitfalls regard the pedagogy itself. First is the need to teach against the grain of tradition when teaching in a detracked class. The pedagogical changes are radical and require a great deal of time and effort on the part of social studies educators. There is a tendency to teach toward the middle of the class and ignore the extremes because differentiation and meeting multiple needs is too complex a task for teachers engaged in such a multitude of changes. Second, teachers who aim to engage in progressive pedagogy for social justice may, in their enthusiasm, overlook the very real need for some students to receive direct instruction in skills (Rubin & Noguera, 2004). It is important that teachers involved in detracking work to meet the skill-level need of their students while they also engage in the progressive pedagogy described in the previous section.

Conclusion

The aim of this article is to describe the general detracking debate in light of its relation to social studies and to describe the many ways that social studies is well suited for detracking in terms of its goals, underpinnings, and best pedagogical practices. Finally, the article outlines some of the challenges and potential pitfalls to successful detracking in social studies. In spite of these potential difficulties, it is essential that social studies educators begin to reflect on the considerable ethi-

cal issues involved in the practice of tracking and how these may undermine the values that undergird the social studies curriculum. As we advocate critical inquiry among our students, it is also essential that we critically examine our roles as teachers of the social studies. To what extent are we committed to fostering democratic thinking and action and social justice in the classroom? To what extent does the practice of tracking undermine that effort? Finally, it is necessary to ask ourselves a question that we ask our students in social studies as they consider issues of equity and justice: What are we willing to do about it?

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