

Spencer Rumsey 516-843-3991 Fax 516/843-2986 2 pages

Tracking Should Be Abolished

Alan Singer, Assistant Professor of Education,
Department of Curriculum and Teaching, Hofstra University (121-38-1731)
H- 718/768-7239 W- 516/463-5853

The assignment of students to educational programs based on their performance on exams, their perceived intelligence or talent, parental pressure or on teacher recommendation, is an educationally unsound practice that is inherently undemocratic. It injures children and weakens our society. We should end school tracking because it is inequitable and reenforces social divisions. Separate academic tracks, just like racially segregated schools in an earlier era, can never provide children with equal education. But we should also oppose tracking because our children suffer from the educational climate that it contributes to.

In most of Long Island, overt school tracking is a secondary school phenomena. Elementary school tracking is more subtle, but it is still present. In early grades, children are divided into ability groups in their classes, and in many districts, enrichment classes and programs are only provided for children who are designated as gifted. As students enter middle school and high school, many parents, increasingly worried whether their children will be prepared for competitive exams, entrance to elite colleges and higher paying professions, pressure districts to provide accelerated programs for selected youngsters. The rest of the students are channeled into regular and remedial tracks. In most cases, once students are processed, they are boxed and labeled for the rest of their school careers.

I approach the issue of school tracking from three different directions- as a college professor, a classroom teacher and as a parent. As an Assistant Professor of Education at Hofstra University, part of my job is to think about what makes sense for our public schools. But I am not an unconnected idealist with his head in the clouds. I taught high school in New York City public schools for most of my career. In addition, like many middle-class parents, my wife and I maneuvered to get our children admitted into the top school track and the best special programs. The way our local public schools were organized, we felt that we would be sacrificing their futures if we didn't.

My opposition to tracking is a product of my experience as a teacher, where I learned to successfully teach in untracked settings, and my unhappiness with my children's experiences in tracked schools. I am convinced that school tracking is poor educational and social policy.

School tracking contributes to social divisions and racial, ethnic and class tensions. It teaches young children to believe that intelligence is innate, people are fundamentally different, and that some are incapable and undeserving of rewards. Tracking encourages competition and increases resentment of others. Denied experiences with diverse groups of young people, our children never learn to work with people different from themselves. It is not coincidental that middle schools, where tracking first becomes overt, are often seething with tension and become sites for explosive behavior.

School tracking injures children emotionally and intellectually, regardless of where they are tracked. Children in lower tracks believe that they are born inferior and destined to be failures. They develop low self-esteem, give up trying to learn and many drop out of school. Students in upper tracks are hurt as well. Many don't understand why they were separated from their friends. They become lonely and alienated. Others students grow anxious. They feel like they are always being tested and that eventually their inadequacies will be exposed. Instead of enjoying learning, they fear that they will be thrown out of the upper track and let down their parents. Even the students who respond to the competition and do well are vulnerable. When, like any ordinary human beings, they stumble, their entire self-image is subject to question. One result of tracking is that even the best students experience school as an oppressive, stressful place.

Our schools don't have to be this way. Research **reported on in the magazine Educational Leadership** shows that all students learn better in untracked schools where heterogeneous groups of students work together in supportive, cooperative communities. In these schools, students help each other master complex ideas and all of them can succeed. Some districts on Long Island, Jericho and Oceanside in Nassau and Oakdale in Suffolk, have already received recognition for efforts to detrack **in the book Crossing the Tracks, by Anne Wheelock for the Massachusetts Advocacy Center**. However, the real challenge will be untracking more heterogeneous and less affluent communities **where upper track classes are often seen as safe havens for white or middle class children**. One model may be Baldwin, which is experimenting with reducing the number of tracks and allowing all students to opt to take more advanced classes.

Detracking schools works best when when adults have high expectations for students, when a district has a long term commitment to reorganization, when parents, teachers and students are involved in planning the detracking process, and

when resources and support services are available to teachers and students. At the beginning, detracking may require more educational dollars **for preparing teachers to work in these kinds of settings**. But I believe our children are worth the investment.