The Background of Tracking

First, this country had the one room school house. Before the industrial revolution, children of different ages and abilities received their education from one teacher in one room. Differentiated instruction was the model for education even before there was a sophisticated name for such a delivery system. Then, in response to the influx of immigrants to the U.S., Americans needed to find an avenue to teach a more diverse population. With the advent of the recently developed IQ test, educators had a method to test incoming students and place them in different classes according to ability (Ansalone, 2003). Tracking appeared to be the answer for Americans to socialize newcomers and provide a path for students to progress academically. The most accepted definition of tracking comes from Oakes (1985) and states that students are sorted into groups according to perceived ability. In general terms, tracking has the following characteristics:

First students are identified in a rather public way as to their intellectual capabilities and accomplishments and separated into a hierarchical system of groups for instruction. Second, these groups are labeled quite openly and characterized in the minds of teachers and others as being of a certain type—high ability, low achieving, slow, average, and so on. Clearly, these groups are not equally valued in the school.... Third individual students in these groups come to be defined by others—both adults and their peers—in terms of these group types.... Fourth, on the basis of these sorting decisions, the groupings of students that result, and the way educators see the students in these groups, teenagers are treated by and experience school very differently. (p. 3)

Historically, tracking in the educational world of the United States aligned to the 1896 ideas of “separate but equal” as demonstrated by the case of Plessy versus Ferguson which ruled that if schools were equal they still could be segregated by race. Desegregation later came about as a result of Brown versus the Board of Education; yet America’s educational foundation still tracked students by grade level; and within those grades, tracked by ability. The conveyor belt of education became the
standard during the industrialized revolution. Before the Civil Right’s Movement of the 60’s, many school counselors divided students into either a vocational track or a college track. Afterward, such large scale tracks began to dissolve in response to the call for equity. Yet, tracking persists. Today, tracks occur more at the class level in courses titled such as honors or remedial (Hallinan, 1994). In late 20th century and early 21st century practice, tracking can be found in “60 percent of all primary and 80 percent of all secondary schools in the United States” (pg. 4).

In general, tracking typically involves various arrangements of grouping students according to ability. Tracking stirs heated debates among educators. Those in favor of tracking purport that this system enhances achievement because of three factors. First it provides a comfortable environment for the student to progress. “According to this perspective, student affective development is favorably influenced when a student’s schoolwork is not invidiously compared to the work of more able peers” (pg. 4). Second, tracking can be an organizational technique that helps teachers. “Tracking is viewed as a managerial technique that prevents less able students from holding back those with greater academic potential” (pg. 5). Third, tracking provides educational organizations an efficient means of allocating their resources. “Proponents of this efficiency perspective believe that schooling in America is entrusted with the responsibility of sorting students in specific categories in the labor market” (pg. 5).

Those that disfavor tracking point to studies that show the deleterious impact this sorting system has on “students’ opportunity to learn (OTL)” (pg. 5). How much of the curriculum is accessible by students in different tracks – especially lower tracks? Ansolone (2003) mentions the argument that the expectations of teachers make a difference in their delivery of content and therefore “lower tracks may contain less of the intended curriculum” (pg. 7). Tracking, by its nature, suggests a differentiated curriculum. Much of the literature highlights this differentiation, especially for the higher tracks. Kozol (1991) in his work, Savage Inequalities, found that classes in higher tracks were taught with more variety and the teachers in those classes had more education and experience. Walk through schools and peek in classrooms suggest those deterrents of tracking in education; tracking categorizes students according to their socioeconomic economic status and those most affected are marginalized students (Oakes & Wells, 1998):

Moreover, tracking esteems ability over hard work. Most students are placed according to a test they took in school. Our society awards the good test takers, but places less value on individual effort and progress. When students face academic challenges in school, the response is often is to move the student to a less challenging class (DiMartino & Miles, 2005). In their article “Reaching Real Equity in Schools,” Dimartino and Miles report the following alarming statistics:

Over 700 studies have been done in the past 50 years on tracking and ability grouping, and the majority of
the research says not to do it. Even so, some estimates say up to 85% of today’s schools still group students for instruction this way” (p.10).

Since tracking has such a negative connotation in education, mostly reinforced by the work of Slavin (1995) and Oakes & Wells (1997), the term “tracking” has given way to the more readily accepted term “ability grouping” (Tesio, 2003). No matter the moniker, the practice still exists. As mentioned earlier, the definition of tracking is the practice of “sorting and grouping students by perceived ability” (Rubin, 2003). In all but a few cases, research has consistently demonstrated that the results of tracking have been deleterious to achievement (Slavin, 1995, Dimarino & Miles, 2005). Unfortunately however, the challenge to meet the needs of diverse populations fuels the system of tracking. According to Burris and Welner (2005), the resistance to un-track the tracking is as much a problem within fundamental beliefs as it is organizational systems or politics.

Of late, ability grouping again has gained some favor with regard to the research on differentiated instruction “The present and future of ability grouping lies in the flexible use of grouping, either in or between classrooms” (Tesio, 2003). The caveat to the acceptability of ability grouping as an effective tool to increase achievement rather than that of tracking as a tool is that flexible means temporary. Tracking has the connotative meaning of permanent grouping. In the article “Diversity vs. White Privilege,” author Christine Sleeter (2001) states that “The tracking system is built on presumptions about kids from low-income backgrounds and kids of color, that their parents don’t care, that they have language deficits, that nobody is around to push them with their homework, that they lack a lot of those things” (p. 4). “The system that sets up the hierarchy of intelligence and excellence is racist” (Landsman, 2004, p.3).

Educators must not make presumptions; nor can they make excuses. In successful schools where the gap is closing, the attitude of the community is that every child can and will learn. They do not blame the environment (Johnston & Viadero, 2000).

Detracking by Definition

Detracking is the process of dismantling institutional and organizational structures or instructional barriers that sort students according to ability. The definition is broad in order to address the inherent complexity. Detracking can occur on multiple levels. For example a study could focus on “detracking the classroom” and this would be where the instructional methodology for mixed ability grouping is the focus of investigation. At the other spectrum, a study could focus on “detracking the program” and this would be, for example, where the enrollment criteria for Advanced Placement courses is the focus of investigation. Therefore, before any discussion of detracking occurs it is necessary to anchor participants’ perspectives on a common definition.

Typically, detracking reform will fall into two types of studies; Slavin (1995) identifies these as 1) High-track/low-track studies that mostly find students benefit
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from high ability groups and students lose when they are in the low ability tracks; and 2) Track/no track research that suggests there in no benefit or loss to students’ achievement by ability grouping whether they are below or above average. Slavin (1995) finds the studies of high-track/low-track problematic. He suggests that it is like “comparing apples to oranges” (p.221). On the other hand, he finds the “track/no track studies are far more meaningful” (p.221).

In practical terms, “no one could argue that ability grouping is beneficial to students in general” (p.222). However, it is probably more beneficial to teachers due to its seeming efficiency. The generally recommended strategy for detracking is to raise the bar and provide support for students to meet those demands. This places the onus on educators to discover the methods that will provide the support. “Recommendations for untracking strategies uniformly reject the idea of simply teaching to the middle in heterogeneous groups” (p.222).

Examples of Detracking

Carol Burris is a high school principal and her efforts to eliminate tracking at her school were worthwhile. South Side High School (SSHS) had attempted other types of reform before they chose to make detracking a priority. “Low tracks simply don’t work,” said Burris and according to the article, “de-tracking worked well” (Welner, 2004). With the support of the school board and the administration, SSHS abandoned ability grouping in core subject areas such as English, social studies and math. Their efforts were rewarded; the achievement results for South Side High School on the state Regents test increased significantly. Furthermore, the graduation rate increased. But most significantly, “Gains were also dramatic in percentages of African American, Latino, and low-socioeconomic-status students taking and passing advanced math courses” (p.16). Rather than “dumbing down the curriculum” SSHS maintained high expectations for all students; they set the accelerated curriculum as their standard and put support strategies in place to ease the transition for many students to face the new academic challenges.

Another example of detracking in action is in Guilford County in North Carolina, where they “systematically increased opportunities for students of color to participate in rigorous courses” (Grier and Peterson, April, 2005, p. 4). In addition to looking at the system, Guilford also looked at the social-cultural aspect of tracking by instituting the “Cool to Be Smart” program. In addition to changes within the system (i.e. enrollment criteria), educators added recruitment efforts and awareness campaigns to narrow the achievement gap. A special benefit to this two-prong approach, in addition to the increase of underrepresented students in AP and IB classes, was the “increased staff members’ expectations” for those students who tend to be underachievers (p.3).

Since structures are often resistant to change, Manuel High School in Colorado made a gradual change to more heterogeneous grouping. They changed the schedule to a block schedule and then they
created smaller inclusive classrooms for ninth and tenth grade students (Dimartino & Miles, 2005). Likewise, Noble High School in Maine “created seven teams for ninth- and tenth-grade students. Teams of 80-90 heterogeneously grouped students complete a common curriculum to graduate” (pg. 11).

Furthermore, Central High School was another example where an English department made a gradual change from three tracks to two (LaPrade, 2008). According to this study, detracking removes barriers:

That does not mean it is easy or without its frustrations and obstacles. However, the data suggests that more students will take the more rigorous courses; and more importantly in this case, more marginalized students will take the more rigorous AP courses if we remove the system’s barriers like tracks. With initiatives, such as this detracking case study, the achievement gap at the top of the academic pyramid has a better chance of narrowing. While the changes in grades and AP test scores were not statistically significant, that in and of itself was remarkable in light of the leap detracking asks many students to make. Educators have a duty to remove those structural barriers no matter how inconvenient it is to do so. Tracks are easy; but that does not make them the equitable or the ethical thing to do. With barriers such as tracks collapsed, other efforts like recruitment or awareness campaigns would have a better chance of success. (p.104).

**Implications for Implementation**

As demonstrated by the above examples, recruitment efforts or awareness campaigns are not enough to narrow the persistent gap in achievement for marginalized students. But with a systematic change, in addition to the recruitment efforts and awareness campaigns, the gap began to narrow. Guilford saw results!

Nieto (1999) proposes “detracking by itself will do little or no good because societal attitudes toward certain groups of people have a profound effect on how schools and teachers interact with students” (p. 164). Therefore, with any systematic change, efforts like recruitment or promotions like awareness should reinforce the reform, otherwise a noble effort such as de-tracking will not be able to influence the principle issues of race, class, and ability.

Research suggests that in order for detracking to make a lasting impact, the community of the school should foster a school climate that is conducive to detracking. The culture or climate is more important than the strategy or intervention (Cooper, 1999). Context cannot be ignored; here are three significant issues to address when a community is trying to create a climate supportive of detracking:

1. An open forum must exist for educators to dialogue to “confront powerful norms that are used to structure classroom practice.”

2. Curriculum must be inclusive of all cultures.

3. Opportunities must increase for ‘social and academic engagement in environments that are nurturing and supportive.’ (p.3.)
Of further consideration is professional development for teachers. In addition to the recruitment efforts and awareness campaigns in place, plus the systematic change of de-tracking, professional development courses for teachers in the teaching and learning of diverse populations will need to be implemented. By eliminating ability grouping, instruction will have to change to meet the needs of more diverse populations. Teachers will need support for differentiated instruction. "Culturally competent instructional action is essential to achieving genuine commitment to educational equity, justice, excellence for students" (Gay, 2000, p.209).

Sometimes, the biggest barrier to success is the students themselves. Charles M. Steele, a Stanford sociologist, found that "minority students may go on to 'disidentify' with the academic task" (Viadero). They do not want to be accused of ignoring their culture and assimilating into white society. Gay discusses one such program, AVID, that advocates for the success of marginalized students "without sacrificing their cultural and ethnic identities" (p.166). Without such efforts by educators to consider a student’s perspective, detracking efforts can be sabotaged.

In a study by Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna (2002) that considered the impact "freedom of choice" had on a detracking initiative, they found that some minority students resisted placement in classes that had an accelerated curriculum because they looked for places that made them feel appreciated by the community.

Furthermore, Yonezawa et al. (2002) uncovered three themes as a result of their research on detracking. These themes can often be interconnected, but they all provide indications why a case of detracking fails where it should succeed. The following table outlines these themes and provides examples of each theme:

Another barrier to successful detracking reforms is the skill-base of both educators and students. If teachers and students don't know how to work well in groups, the dynamics can be stifling (p. 168). In Rubin's (2003) study of a detracked classroom, she found that for detracking to be successful, the barriers of
the teacher’s professional development must coincide with the students’ social development. The following example comes from Rubin’s study of ninth graders and illustrates how worlds collide— even unintentionally:

Christie’s interpretation of the teacher’s group assignment strategy, heard by the entire class, was that it was somehow dangerous to group African American students together. While this was not the teacher’s intention, Christie’s passionate comment indicates how close to the surface tensions around racial issues were in the classroom and how group placement could exacerbate such tensions. (p. 14)

Despite the barriers described above, detracking reform efforts have merit. The core beliefs of detracking promote democratic structures and practices. When equity and excellence can be the standard for all educational systems, then the gap will close.

**Detracking Reforms That Support Race to the Top**

As a reminder, the four components of the NCLB law for educators are accountability and testing, flexibility and local control, funding for what works, and expanded parental options (Fact Sheet: No Child Left Behind). These parameters give schools a guideline to make reform decisions that will produce adequate yearly progress for every child. In addition, the competitive nature of Obama’s Race to the Top agenda, is first about student achievement and secondly school improvement. Detracking would provide the opportunities for student success by helping to remove the barriers, institutionally, instructionally, or individually, that hinder progress.

As noted earlier, a change in the system is not enough to close the gap; and it takes more than just mere awareness, reinforcement, or recruitment to move this mountain. Slavin (1995) argues that research does not justify tracking in any case and we are negligent if we ignore this evidence.

As such, dismantling the tracks, at any level, could potentially help reach NCLB goals. For example, in the impressive case of Rockville Centre School District in New York as reported by Burris and Welner (2005), their district’s reform efforts helped them reach ambitious goals. When the research against tracking was at its height (Slavin 1995, Oakes & Wells, 1998), the district took on the challenge of detracking classes. Of importance, Rockville did not do away with low-end and high-end tracks and teach to the middle, “The district began replacing its tracked classes with heterogeneously grouped classes in which the curriculum formerly reserved
for the district’s high-track students was taught” (p.595). They increased their expectations that all students can learn. They raised the bar; they set their sights high. In doing so, the results are exciting. The following table highlights those achievements:

In general, Rockville made a systemic change and they put in place initiatives for instructional support during these transitional times. For example, the district offered “every-other-day support classes” that were “linked to the curriculum;” and teachers were given the flexibility to “pre- and post-teach topics to students needing additional resources” (p.597). This factor is crucial in conjunction with Race to the Top goals because it affords the flexibility and local control needed by schools to demonstrate AYP. Most deterrents of detracking worry that the high achieving student will be “pulled down,” but as Rockville demonstrates achievement increased for them as well.

The results of the detracking efforts of the Rockville School District bear testimony to the previously mentioned arguments of Slavin (1995) about the recommended method of detracking by raising the bar and helping students meet those academic demands through a variety of means of support. “Ability grouping by its nature works against democratic and egalitarian norms, often creates racial or ethnic divisions, risks making terrible and long-lasting mistakes, and condemns many children to low-quality instruction and low-quality futures” (p.222). The authors of Turning Points 2000 state that “if we want to improve teaching and learning in schools, reformers must start with where the schools are, just as teachers must discover what their students understand, and misunderstand, in order to target curriculum, instruction, and assessment appropriately” (Jackson and Davis, 2000, p. 48).

**Best Practices**

**Instructional**

Differentiated instruction as described by Tomlinson (1995) is based on a set of principles to help teachers facilitate learn-
Table 3: *Comparing classrooms* (adapted from Tomlinson, 1995, pg. 16).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Classroom</th>
<th>Differentiated Classroom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whole class instruction dominates</td>
<td>A variety of instructional configurations exist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A single text prevails</td>
<td>Multiple resources and materials are available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single assessments are most common, i.e. chapter tests</td>
<td>Multiple methods of assessment, formal and informal, are on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructors rarely consider student choice</td>
<td>Interest-based choices fuel student engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disregard of learning differences</td>
<td>Focus on multiple intelligences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A single point of reference determines excellence</td>
<td>Progress over a period of time determines excellence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers manage student behavior</td>
<td>Teachers help students become self-directing learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often, one answer is sufficient</td>
<td>Multiple answers is encouraged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often, student differences are ignored</td>
<td>Student differences determine planning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

...ing for all students. In detracked classrooms where diversity rules, such an instructional framework helps move theory into practice.

1. Instruction centers on the essential or core components of the content area.
2. Teachers promote the unique gifts and talents of each student. They accept the students as they are and help them achieve all they can be.
4. Teachers modify the content, instruction, and assessment in ways to meet individual needs.
5. Respect fuels the work at hand.
6. Instruction is a collaborative process between the teacher and students.
7. Teachers take into account the goal of the individual with respect of the group norms.
8. Flexibility is inherent in the design and approach to teaching and learning.

In order to better see the differences between a traditional classroom and a differentiated classroom, the following table juxtaposes two typical classrooms. Notice
the movement from a teacher-centered, teacher directed environment in the traditional classroom to more student-centered, collaborative environment in the differentiated classroom.

Removing instructional barriers to promote equity and excellence in classrooms for all students requires concerted efforts on several fronts. “Many detracked researchers note that curriculum and pedagogy do not take place in a vacuum” (pg. 10). Educators and community members need to consider the social aspects of heterogeneous grouping paradigms as well as the academic dimensions. Detracked classrooms should be safe places for students to learn. They need to be supportive environments for students to take learning risks. Rubin (2006) cautions educators that tracks or “refragmentation” can occur at any level— even within a single class if community values are not addressed.

Even with a differentiated instruction model in place and a socially and emotionally supportive classroom environment, students in detracked classrooms need “access to meaningful academic support” outside the classroom as well (pg.10).

**Institutional**

Instructional strategies, such as those described by Marzano (1998) in Classroom Instruction that Works, support teachers’ planning efforts to meet the needs of diverse learners inside the differentiated classroom; however, institutional reform efforts must be considered because the can be critical to overall success of detracking efforts. From programs to school sites to districts, detracking reforms must provide support at three levels.

First, some students will require more support in order to make the leap from lower tracks. In addition to the aforementioned instructional strategies used in classrooms, extra support classes can give students the needed time and attention to make the necessary gains. “Such classes should be designed to help students catch up on skills and concepts they may have missed along the way, and to support them in completing their daily work in the detracked class” (Rubin, 2006, pg.10).

Second, teachers require support too. They need the time to plan these complex lessons. They need the training to help them teach in these non-traditional dynamic classrooms. They need more opportunities to work with students individually. According to Rubin (2006) in detracked schools that did not afford teachers support, such as professional development or planning time, the teachers struggled with the reform efforts to the point of returning to their former teaching practices.

Third, schools and districts are the pivotal support mechanism for institutional reform efforts. If systemic barriers can be broken down and replaced with a variety of social and academic support efforts, then the achievement gap that often defies even the noblest efforts will subsist. Rubin and Noguera (2004) call for schools to step up and support detracking efforts in meaningful ways when they wrote:

Although detracking itself may seem like a substantial alteration of the usual manner of business in our public schools, even deeper changes in school structures and distribution of institutional resources may be nec-
essary for the reform to reach its intended goals of increasing equity and access for previously under-served students. For detracking to truly serve those whom it was intended to benefit, schools may need to put more resources into measures that support these students. This may include ensuring that detracked classes are smaller and therefore able to provide more personalized support for students. It is also helpful to add classes and programs designed to accelerate the skills development of students who were previously tracked low. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, teachers who will be required to teach detracked classes must be provided substantial support and training on how to teach such classes. They may also need the opportunity to meet regularly as a group, to observe each other teach, and to share and analyze student work so that they can support each other in meeting the academic goals of this reform. (pg. 98).

One such institutional reform structure that could help schools with detracking efforts is the Professional Learning Communities (PLC) model as described by DuFour et al. A PLC focuses on the following three core principles: 1) A shift of focus from teaching to learning, 2) A shift of control from hierarchical to collaborative, and 3) A shift from goals to results (DuFour, 2004). First, a learning centered environment requires the educational system to investigate what to do when children find learning difficult. Within a collabora-

rative culture, “teachers become aware of the incongruity between their commitment to ensure learning for all students (designed and applied curriculum) and their lack of a coordinated strategy to respond when students do not learn (acquired curriculum)” (p. 7). In this type of setting, DuFour makes the point that “teachers approach this discrepancy collaboratively by designing strategies to ensure that struggling students receive additional time and support, no matter who their teacher is” (p.7). The community must respond in quick and direct ways.

Next, collaborative work is the most important component for success as “Teachers work in teams, engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning” (p.8). Schools must allocate the time for teachers to dialogue in order for significant, important work to occur! “For meaningful collaboration to occur, a number of things must also stop happening. Schools must stop pretending that merely presenting teachers with state standards or district curriculum guides will guarantee that all students have access to a common curriculum” (p.8).

Most importantly, professional learning communities will “judge their effectiveness based on results” (p.9). As teacher-teams work toward equity and excellence in their classrooms throughout the school year, they will build common assessments; and it is the examination of their students’ results from those assessments that will be the map to instruction.

PLCs evolve; they are cyclical. They promote a continuous learning cycle as teachers collaborate and collaborators investigate best practices for teaching and
learning and the cycle repeats. Ultimately, until the gap is closed and student achievement is at a hundred percent, the work of a PLC continues.

Professional learning communities can work, but it is work! As a community, there is a responsibility to and for one another. The goals for learning teams should promote equity and excellence; student achievement is the priority. It is not as much about teaching as it is about learning. Point of view is critical to the success of a professional learning community as the schools move from teacher mode to learning mode – it is a matter of direction.

“The main enemies of large-scale reform are overload and extreme fragmentation” (Fullan, 2000, p. 6). The professional learning community model minimizes those dangers. With shared responsibility between communities of experts working toward common goals, there is less of a chance for “overload” or “extreme fragmentation.” The prospect that a reform movement, specifically PLCs, can be a long-standing effective model for productive change has never been better.

Conclusion

Detracking a school system that has long established roots is challenging at best. Despite these challenges, even now during Obama’s Race to the Top, educators need to champion detracking as an opportunity to change some of the injustices that hide in classrooms. Detracking has the potentiality to help close the achievement gap. This is a call to reflect upon this undercurrent that exists in our schools and begin to make the changes necessary to build a culture of high expectations. Why not build a system of supportive measures to help students succeed, rather than pool all of the low achieving students in one class?

While research has not discovered a miracle cure to the close the achievement gap trends, two recent studies called “for broadening the approaches commonly used to address the problem now” (Viadero, 2005, p. 5). Schools should start with systemic changes, fueled by reinforcement efforts and awareness campaigns. Since the achievement gap is a persistent cancer in education; schools must be more comprehensive in their fight against this disease.

References


