Detracking in Context: How Local Constructions of Ability Complicate Equity-Geared Reform

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Background/Context: Recent sociocultural studies of detracking describe the ways in which notions of ability—local understandings of students’ intellectual capacities—are at play in these settings, shaping both the politics and the practice of the reform. This study extends this examination into the classrooms of detracking schools.

Purpose: This article considers the enactment of detracking in the ninth grade social studies classrooms of three public high schools. Through a detailed look at classroom life in racially and socioeconomically distinct public high school settings, it explores how local notions of ability shape the implementation of classroom practices in general and of detracking reform in particular.

Setting: The research took place in three public comprehensive high schools in a northeastern state with the following student populations: 1) low income and predominantly African American and Latino students; 2) high income and predominantly White students; 3) socioeconomically diverse and predominantly African American and White students.

Research Design: This study used an interpretive research methodology and a multiple case study design.

Data Collection and Analysis: Data was collected at each of the three schools over the course of an academic year in the following ways: 1) extensive observations of detracked ninth grade social studies classes; 2) interviews with students and teachers participating in those classes; 3) shadowing of students through the school day; 4) collection of school generated documents.

Findings/Results: At the low income, majority African American and Latino school, detracking reform was framed by a discourse of deficit that posited all of the school’s students...
as unwaveringly low in ability, and classroom practices provided little opportunity for students to either display or develop competence. In contrast, detracking at the suburban, homogeneous school spurred a creative curriculum targeted to the needs of individual students in the heterogeneous classroom, all of whom were presumed to be bright, motivated and college bound despite varied skills. At the racially and socioeconomically integrated school, a community and school system in which people were highly concerned with issues of equity and diversity, teaching practices in the detracked classroom emphasized flexibility and personalization, providing opportunities for students to examine social and cultural issues in a discussion-centered framework. Students, both within and among the three schools, experienced detracking reform in ways that were distinct and not equally beneficial.

**Conclusions:** Translating a structural reform into change that is meaningful for students is a complex endeavor. Effective detracking involves changes at multiple levels: in institutional structures, classroom practices, and teacher and student beliefs about ability.

**DETRACKING IN CONTEXT: HOW LOCAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF ABILITY COMPLICATE EQUITY-GEARED REFORM**

The sorting and grouping of students for instruction is a long-standing organizational practice in U.S. schools. Often referred to as tracking, this process has been critiqued for providing inadequate and inequitable education to students in low level courses, for separating students in integrated schools along race and class lines, and for perpetuating unequal access to a college-bound curriculum. Detracking, a reform that intentionally places students into mixed-ability classes, is an attempt to remedy the negative effects of tracking. The debate over the implications of each of these forms of school organization is on-going, arousing great interest and fervor on the part of educators and non-educators alike.

Although many of the deleterious effects of tracking have been documented, detracking does not present an uncontested solution. The research on detracking is varied in method, scope and locus of investigation, with examples of both success and failure. Recent sociocultural studies of detracking describe the ways in which notions of ability—local understandings of students’ intellectual capacities—are at play in these settings. Such notions, these researchers argue, are constructed within hierarchies of racial and class difference that are both locally situated and framed by larger societal discourses and patterns of inequality (Oakes, Wells, Jones & Datnow, 1997; Rubin, 2003a; Wells & Serna, 1996). But how do such constructions of ability shape detracking practices inside heterogeneously grouped classrooms, and does this process vary across school settings? What is the effect on educational opportunities for
students, both within and between schools? The answers to such ques-
tions are critical to understanding the potential effectiveness of detrack-
ing reform, and may illuminate factors affecting the implementation of
equity-geared school reform in general.

This article considers the enactment of detracking\(^1\) in the ninth grade
social studies classrooms of three public high schools. Through a detailed
look at classroom life in racially and socioeconomically distinct public
high school settings, this cross-case comparison study explores how local
notions of ability shape the implementation of detracking reform. At
urban Oakcity High School,\(^2\) detracking reform was framed by a dis-
course of deficit that posited all of the school’s students as unwaveringly
low in ability, and classroom practices provided little opportunity for stu-
dents to either display or develop competence. In contrast, detracking at
suburban, homogeneous Walnutville High School spurred a creative cur-
riculum targeted to the needs of individual students in the heteroge-
neous classroom, all of whom were presumed to be bright, motivated and
college bound despite varied skills; these opportunities, however, were
denied to students who were not seen as “typical” Walnutville students,
and thus were excluded from detracked classrooms. In racially and
socioeconomically integrated Elmtown, a community and school system
in which people were highly concerned with issues of equity and diversity,
teaching practices in the detracked classroom emphasized flexibility and
personalization, providing opportunities for students to examine social
and cultural issues in a discussion-centered framework. Students, both
within and among the three schools, experienced detracking reform in
ways that were distinct and not equally beneficial.

Grounded in the view that classroom research can reveal important
links between macro and micro levels of social relations (Omi & Winant,
1986), this study of detracking sheds light on how disturbingly uneven
educational opportunities for students can be produced, both within and
beyond detracked settings. It focuses attention on how equity-geared
school reforms can become part of the larger discourses and structures
that maintain inequalities among communities and groups of people.
This research aims to elucidate the ways in which daily school practices
are both enmeshed with the preservation of privilege and disadvantage
and can, at times, work to disrupt these long-standing patterns of inequal-
ity. More practically, it seeks to pinpoint both institutional and classroom
practices that help or hinder the development of detracked settings that
provide enhanced educational opportunities for all students.
BACKGROUND

TRACKING

Tracks and ability groups, along with age-level grades, are among the predominant organizing practices of American public schools (Wheelock, 1992). Not all students are in tracked classes for the entire school day, but as students move on through school they usually encounter an increasingly rigid ability-driven structure (Oakes, 1985; Wheelock). Proponents of tracking argue that ability-driven tracks make it easier for teachers to target instruction appropriately for varying student needs (Hallinan, 1994).

Tracking occurs in a variety of manners within individual schools. It may be overt, with counselors working, at times in consultation with students, to choose a particular class belonging to a certain track. It may be automatic, with test scores from junior high determining a student’s high school track. It may be covert, with grouping done by teacher and counselor recommendation and no sign in the master schedule to indicate that one section of a particular class is any different from another. However, students are often aware of ability grouping even when it is done in a covert manner (Oakes, 1985; Wheelock, 1992).

Many researchers argue that the practice of tracking is inherently unfair and that it plays a crucial role in the creation of inequalities within our society (Goodlad & Oakes, 1988; Oakes, 1985, 1986, 1992; Mehan, 1992; Mehan, Hubbard & Villanueva, 1994; Slavin, 1991, 1995; etc.). These researchers argue that tracking serves as a device for sorting students by race and class. Moreover, researchers claim that students in different tracks do not receive the same quality of education (Oakes, 1985; Page, 1987). These critics hold that curriculum, teaching, and social interactions in the classroom are all affected by tracking, to the detriment of students in the lower track. The consequence is a system that is demoralizing and de-motivating for the children, usually poor and of color, who end up in the lowest tracks (Murphy & Hallinger, 1989; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992).

Indeed, the correspondence between school tracking and structural inequalities found in the larger society has been well documented. African American, Latino and low-income children of all ethnicities are overrepresented in low tracks and vocational programs (Oakes, 1992). In integrated schools, tracking often res segregates students by race, and tracking has been legally challenged as amounting to de facto segregation (Welner & Oakes, 1996). Tracking can also be seen as a vital part of how schools reproduce inequality, a structural arrangement through
which individuals come to accept their own socioeconomic positions as inevitable and natural.

A variety of empirical studies support these critiques of tracking. In several studies, Hallinan (with Sørensen, 1986; with Kubitscheck, 1999) found that students assigned to low ability groups scored lower on standardized tests than if they had been placed in mixed or high ability groups. Braddock and Dawkins (1993) analyzed NELS data and found that students in lower tracks moved more slowly through the curriculum and did worse in school. Gamoran (1987) found that the achievement gap between low and high track students was larger than the gap between students who leave high school without graduating and high school graduates. He also found that low income students and students of color were disproportionately represented in lower tracks.

More recent research, most notably in the UK and the Netherlands, extends these findings. Wiliam and Bartholomew (2004) concluded that in the UK, a student’s track (or “set”) was more consequential for academic progress than the school he or she attended. Researchers in the Netherlands found that students in homogeneous clusters became more interested in the academic performance of their same-track peers, with a negative effect on low-achievers, while students in mixed-ability groupings were less vulnerable to this “reference process” (Meijnen & Guldemond, 2002). Boaler, Wiliam, and Brown (2000) concluded that students in “setted” (tracked) math classes in the UK experienced a “curriculum polarization” in which high tracked students were forced to move too rapidly through course material and low tracked students experienced restrictions in their opportunities to learn. This was disadvantageous to both groups, and students in both tracks reported dissatisfaction with their placement. Stearns (2004) concluded, based on her analysis of NELS data, that schools with a high degree of tracking differentiation had a lower degree of “interracial friendliness.”

In the late 1980s and 1990s opposition to tracking moved beyond the academic community and, in some places, became policy. During this time period, tracking was formally condemned by the National Governors Association (1993), the Carnegie Council for Adolescent Development (1989), the College Board (1989), The National Education Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, the California Department of Education, the Massachusetts State Legislature, the Texas State Board of Education and the State of Alabama, among others (Welner & Oakes, 1996). These widespread proclamations led to a proliferation of detracking reforms, some of which are discussed in the following section.
DETRACKING

Condemnation of tracking led to a variety of attempts at detracking, the dismantling of ability-driven grouping practices. Although there is considerable variation in how detracking has been carried out, the reform generally entails an attempt to group students heterogeneously as a means of ensuring that all students, regardless of their race or class background, perceived academic ability, or previous school performance have access to high quality curriculum, teachers, and material resources. Detracking efforts have frequently generated controversy, and in some communities concerted opposition. Those most likely to oppose these efforts are the parents of children who previously had been placed in the higher tracks, who fear that efforts to promote detracking will result in lowered academic standards. With political and economic resources on their side, such parents have succeeded in blocking detracking efforts in some schools and communities (Oakes, Quartz, Ryan, & Lipton, 2000; Wells & Serna, 1996; Welner, 2001). In other communities, opponents of tracking have squared off with its defenders in drawn out conflicts over the issue that have involved legal challenges, the use of local referendums, and even street protests (Oakes et al., 1997).

Despite the controversy, various types of detracking have been implemented in many schools and, in some cases, entire school districts. Schools and school districts have interpreted the reform in a variety of ways, resulting in divergent approaches to detracking. On one end of the spectrum are deep restructuring efforts, such as the complete elimination of ability grouping for all subject areas throughout an entire school district. On the other end of the spectrum are changes that do not directly affect a school’s track structure, such as providing more access to high track classes for students formerly in lower tracks.

There are a number of large-scale examples of detracking. Grossman and Ancess (2004) describe a suburban school district in the Northeast that detracked math from elementary school through the end of high school. Oxley (1994) describes the reorganization of several high schools into smaller, detracked sub-units. At Southside High School in Rockville Centre, New York, detracking reform began in English and social studies, then continued into science and finally to math classrooms (Burris, Welner, Wiley, & Murphy, this issue; Education Digest, 2004; Garrity, 2004). These are detracking efforts that remake entire schools or even districts.

Other efforts are on a smaller scale. Some are limited to particular subject areas, frequently language arts and social studies in a “cored” structure (Cooper, 1996; Rubin, 2003a, 2003b). Others implement detracking
at a specific grade level, often ninth grade (Fine, Weis, & Powell, 1997). Others detrack one subject at a particular grade level, such as eighth grade Earth Science (King, Weitzman, & Keane, 2004). At some schools, detracking is in the hands of the students, who are allowed to self-select into higher level courses if they choose to do so (Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002). In other schools, students are chosen to take part in college preparatory courses, and given academic and social support to help them succeed (Mehan et al., 1994; Mehan & Hubbard, 1999). Such reforms provide a detracked experience and/or greater access to previously exclusive courses for some students, while maintaining a track structure in the rest of the school.

Although the wide range of reforms that fall under the label of detracking make it difficult to reach a verdict on its impact upon students, there is evidence that, when implemented well, detracking has the potential to dramatically affect student performance and the quality of students’ educational experiences. A number of scholarly research articles describe exemplary cases of detracking in individual classrooms or departments in a variety of subject areas (e.g., Boaler, 2006; Freedman, Delp, & Crawford, 2005; Horn, 2006) and more systemically in whole schools (e.g., Alvarez & Mehan, 2006; Burris, Welnner, Wiley & Murphy, this issue). In all of these studies, successful detracking efforts incorporated change on a variety of levels: modifying school structures and providing resources to support the detracking efforts and the students and teachers involved in them, altering classroom curriculum and instruction to those most appropriate for heterogeneous settings, and integrating practices that facilitated a transformation of students’ and teachers’ belief systems about learning and ability (Rubin, 2006).

Beyond best practices, a group of interpretive and socioculturally oriented studies of detracking document the social, cultural and political dimensions of the reform. Oakes et al. (1997) describe how school and community discourses around issues of race and ability come into play during the implementation of detracking in schools, especially within racially and socioeconomically diverse communities. Wells and Serna (1996) argue from their research in detracking schools that socioeconomically privileged parents resist detracking efforts because they believe the reform will entail a loss in status and opportunity for their children. Yonezawa et al. (2002) explore the institutional barriers and the difficult personal decisions that some students of color faced when detracking was implemented by means of student choice. These studies have contributed much to our understanding of how local and societal discourses and structural inequalities shape the implementation of detracking, although they do not describe how these forces play out within actual
detacked classrooms in terms of classroom practices and opportunities for students.

A few studies employ this theoretical and methodological vantage point to analyze what goes on inside of detracked classrooms. In a case study of a detracked ninth grade program at a diverse urban school, Rubin (2003a) argues that aspects of the school context framed and permeated students’ interactions in their detracked classes, at times reproducing the very inequalities that detracking was designed to address. Fine et al. (1997) describe how detracked English classrooms in an integrated high school became spaces where students challenged each other to examine new viewpoints, thereby embodying the ideals of education for democracy. In both of these studies, teachers played powerful roles in shaping the implementation of detracking in particular school contexts. Such studies point toward the power of local contexts, including the construction of student ability in particular settings, to shape detracking reform.

This study builds on this tradition of interpretive work in detracked settings, asking the following: How are notions of ability constructed in schools with different racial and socioeconomic make-ups, different resources, amid distinct communities? How might these notions shape teaching practices in detracked classrooms, and with what results for students?

METHODOLOGY

METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

This study is grounded in both the interpretive and critical paradigms. Researchers taking the interpretive perspective view reality as socially constructed, and believe that individuals participating in “social scenes” (Mehan, 1992) negotiate the meaning of those scenes on a moment-by-moment basis. The critical paradigm is rooted in a concern with the “sources and dimensions of inequality” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 45) within larger systems, and how those systems frame the local experiences and possibilities of those individuals and groups with the least power (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Merging these two perspectives provided a framework from which to analyze the varied meanings of detracking for its diverse participants, as situated within broader school and societal patterns of racial and socioeconomic inequality.

PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

In this study, I use a multiple case study design, appropriate for the
investigation of a “contemporary phenomenon [detracking] within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2003, p. 13). Data was collected at three public high schools in the same state, with detracking in place in at least one course. In each of the three schools, detracking was in place in social studies and English at the ninth grade level, with mainstreamed special education students included in these classes. Each school also had self-contained classes for special education students who were determined through the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process as unable to be effectively educated in mainstream settings for either academic or behavioral reasons. Such classes are a feature of most U.S. high schools, detracked or not.

Large comprehensive public high schools with varied race and class demographics were selected for the purposes of theoretical replication, to “predict contrasting results” (Yin, 2003, p. 47). Table 1 in the appendix contains detailed information about each school.

Oakcity High School: A large, comprehensive high school located in a low-income urban area serving a low-income, predominantly African American and Latino student body, with small numbers of white and Asian American students.

Walnutville High School: A large, comprehensive high school located in predominantly middle to upper middle-income suburban area, serving an overwhelmingly white student body, with small numbers of Asian American and African American students.

Elmtown High School: A large, comprehensive high school located in a socioeconomically mixed suburban area, serving a predominantly African American and white student body, with small numbers of Latino and Asian American students, and a sizable “mixed race” population.

One detracked ninth grade classroom was examined in each school. Classrooms were selected for study in which the students in the classroom reflected the range of ability levels and the racial and socioeconomic diversity of the school. Teachers were selected who had several years of experience teaching in the detracked setting, were nominated by their department chair as able and experienced, and who were willing to participate in reflective conversations over the course of the study.

Five or six students at each school site were selected as key informants,
based on academic, racial, gender, and socioeconomic diversity and willingness to participate in reflective conversations. While these students were not selected to “represent” particular groups, in a study designed to investigate the impact of detracking, it was important to elicit the viewpoints of a diverse group of students. The five students had a range of achievement and skill levels, operationalized through math placement, grades, student self-reporting and teacher input, and reflected the racial and socioeconomic diversity of the school as a whole. Willingness to engage in reflective discussion was determined through an initial interview conducted at the beginning of the year.

Other adults interviewed included the in-class support (ICS) teachers for special education students in each classroom, social studies department chairs and school guidance counselors. Tables 2-5 in the appendix contain relevant information about each of these participants.

DATA COLLECTION

The researcher and her assistants tracked students across both time (from the beginning to the end of the school year) and space (in their detracked classes, their other classes, and between classes). Each student participant was interviewed twice, and “shadowed” for an entire school day. The focal class at each school was observed 20–25 times, and the focal teacher was interviewed twice.

As the study proceeded, the researchers realized that the ICS teachers working in the focal classrooms had valuable perspectives on the detracked setting and comprised an important part of the teaching and learning landscape for both students and the focal teacher. The principal researcher interviewed each of these ICS teachers. It also became apparent that school guidance counselors played a role in and were an important source of information about student course placement, support options, college plans, as well as other issues. Guidance counselors were interviewed at two of the three study schools. The completed data set includes over 570 pages of transcribed interviews and over 450 pages of observational data, along with data gathered from school, district, and state education department records.

DATA ANALYSIS

As in most interpretive research, data analysis for this project was iterative and on-going. Relying on a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the researcher wrote reflective memos throughout the data collection process, noting key issues that emerged during all stages of data
collection (e.g., “meeting students’ varied needs,” “detracking dilemmas
for teachers”). After data collection was completed, the researcher read
the entire data set, utilizing the constant comparison method to begin to
delineate codes and categories of codes. Categories were generated that
applied across the three case studies (e.g., “teaching philosophy”,
descriptions of the community”, “descriptions of students,” “curricu-
lum,” “classroom activities”); each school had both unique and shared
codes within the larger categories (e.g., “personal approach,” “high-pow-
ered,” “low level,” “textbook based,” “discussion”). Relationships among
codes and categories led to the development of theoretical assertions
(e.g., “constructions of ability shape classroom practices”), which were
described in memos and themselves compared to the data, revised, and
used to refine the codes and categories being used. Memos on the cen-
tral assertions of the study were written for each case, utilizing the com-
mon categories, relevant codes, and illustrative pieces of data from mul-
tiple sources. These memos became the heart of the findings, which are
organized into the three sub-sections described below.

Local constructions of ability

The interpretation of how ability was locally constructed at each site,
described in the first section of each of the cases, was based on an analy-
sis of: 1) school adults’ beliefs about the attributes of students, including
their knowledge and intellectual capacity, their motivation, their behav-
ior, their linguistic competence and (often unstated, but hinted at) their
race and class backgrounds; and 2) school adults’ beliefs about the attrib-
utes of the local community and students’ families, including values relating
to education, class status, race and ethnicity, influence over the
school system, professional status and educational background. The
descriptions of these local constructions of ability were derived from
interviews with adults in the setting, including teacher, department chair,
counselors, inclusion teachers, examination of community and school
generated documents, and shadowing of students across the entirety of
their school day.

This article focuses on describing notions of ability that adults held
about the students in each setting. Student constructions of ability, while
equally important and interwoven with those of adults, were less con-
ected to the determination of classroom detracking practices which
were, to a large extent, controlled by the adults in the school. Indeed, this
analysis shows that adults’ notions of students’ abilities were often con-
structed from materials that were not found in students’ actual classroom
performance and behavior.
Teaching practices in the detracked classroom

Each case describes teaching practices in the detracked classroom that were linked to the detracked nature of the class by the adults in the setting. These descriptions were based on an analysis of frequently observed classroom activities, curricular emphases, pedagogical techniques, classroom management strategies, and informal interactions between students and adults and students with their peers. Data for this analysis was gathered by observing and documenting the class over time, interviewing students and adults about the focal class, and collecting documents used in the classroom.

Opportunities for students

My interpretation of the educational opportunities that were available for students in each of the detracked settings is based on an analysis of how possible it was for students from varied groups to utilize the detracked setting in order to successfully access a high level curriculum, the primary goal of detracking. This was determined through an examination of several factors in each setting:

- **Access**: Are students who would previously have been placed in different tracks now included in the same classroom, and is a higher level curriculum being provided?
- **Support**: Do students receive the support needed to do well with the curriculum?
- **Challenge**: Do students receive appropriately challenging curriculum?

Data for this analysis was gathered through classroom observations, review of classroom documents, and interviews with students, teachers and other school personnel.

Each example from the data that was chosen to illustrate an aspect of the findings was one of many other similar examples in the data set.

FINDINGS

Many outside observers would assume that the detracked ninth grade World History classes at three large public high schools in the same state would be quite similar. Yet both within and beyond the detracked classrooms of Oakcity, Walnutville and Elmtown high schools, the curriculum, pedagogy, expectations, and goals for students were strikingly different,
embedded in teacher and community understandings of the needs, priorities, and characteristics of particular communities and students. In all three settings, local constructions of ability appeared to shape teaching practices, resulting in particular opportunities for students. Drawing upon analysis of interview, observational and textual data, this findings section, consisting of the three case studies, describes the local constructions of ability at each school, the detracking practices in each of the participating classrooms, and the educational opportunities for students that resulted in each of the three detracked settings.

CASE ONE: OAKCITY HIGH SCHOOL

…they [Oakcity] just did away with those levels [tracks]…I think one of the reasons was you had so many kids that were at the same level. So, you know, when we had North Oakcity here and Radishville [more affluent, white communities] and so forth, you had these varied levels. And when those kids departed, then that concept of tracking sort of went out the window.
- Mr. Gray, Social studies department chair, Oakcity High School

Oakcity High School is a large, comprehensive public high school in a low income, urban setting. As of 2003, the student body was 61% Latino, 35% African American, 2% white and 1% Asian American, with 70% of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch.³ The school’s students scored relatively low on the statewide proficiency test, with 44.4% of the students scoring in the lowest of the three categories of proficiency⁴ (“partial”) in language arts literacy, and 68.7% achieving only “partial” proficiency in mathematics. Only 3.7% of the students scored in the highest proficiency category (“advanced”) in language arts literacy, and 3.3% in mathematics. In 2003, around 50% of the graduating seniors reported that they planned to attend either two or four year college, 25% planned to begin full time work, 7% planned to pursue “other” educational options, and 18% had other, unspecified plans.

At Oakcity High School, adults held a limited view of students that was both produced within larger societal discourses about urban teens of color, and constructed amid local practices that provided students with little to no opportunity to display anything other than compliance and mastery of rote, low level skills. Students were painted with broad brushstrokes—as “urban,” unmotivated and unskilled. In this setting, as Mr. Gray’s above description of the elimination of tracking at Oakcity High School indicates, detracking was seen as a concession to the low abilities of the students rather than an opportunity to raise the level of instruc-
tion. Shaped by a locally held view of students as all at the same low level, the teaching practices of the detracked classroom provided limited if any opportunity for students to access a higher level curriculum.

This section will use data from interviews with adults and students at Oakcity High School, as well as data gathered through classroom and school observations, to illustrate this process.

Local constructions of ability at Oakcity High School: “Deficiencies all along the way.”

Mr. Bartlett, a veteran social studies teacher, was not hesitant in his description of his students. In his eyes, they lacked all the right things: knowledge, persistence, good behavior, and academic skills. They had too much of the wrong things: violent and uncaring families, poverty, drug problems, gang affiliations, and early sexuality. He said,

They need academic skills in the worst way. Sometimes it amazes me what they don’t know, such as the word “country” and “nation” are similar…there’s a constant dichotomy in an urban area, because you think they know a basic and they don’t.

The textbook they were using, he told me, was a seventh grade book, but “the kids can’t understand it. I’ve told them so many times that the brown color on the maps means elevation, but they still don’t get it.”

Echoing this sense of the students as intellectually deficient, Mr. Gray, the social studies department chair, described the typical Oakcity student as, “...deficient in the abstract thinking. Taking an A and a B and a C and get a relationship correlation, whatever, and then coming up with a C. Problem solving, critical thinking, long-term planning, deficiencies all along the way.”

In addition to their low skills, Oakcity students, according to the adults around them, were unmotivated, refusing to do anything to remedy their deficiencies. Mr. Batelli, the special education support teacher in Mr. Bartlett’s room described his biggest challenge as, “...getting the kids motivated to do their work...getting them to realize that, you know, they need this.”

These school adults frequently explained the intellectual deficits they perceived in their students as linked to the urban environment. Mr. Bartlett described how he felt the Oakcity community affected his students,
Some of them are aged beyond their years. But that’s cultural, social...Most of the ninth graders in an urban environment like Oakcity, uh, chronologically they’re going on 25, 30. They’ve seen too much...they’ve been around too much. So they come to us with street smarts and we need to make them book smart.

In his class, he told me, he had “kids who are recidivists, kids who have been in jail.” Gang involvement was another specter of deviance. Mr. Bartlett said he was “amazed” last year when he “asked my class of ninth graders...how many had been approached by, to join a gang. Almost every hand in my ninth grade class went up.”

Students’ families were seen as another source of students’ academic problems. Mr. Bartelli speculated that,

...they go home, they get an F or an A, there’s no...difference how their parents treat them. You know, I might be wrong but it seems like a lot of times the parents don’t put a big emphasis on school...I think that has a huge, huge impact on it [students’ motivation].

In this setting, Mr. Bartlett explained, the “one thing” that the kids really understood was reward and punishment, that “if they screw up they owe you time. It’s that mentality. It’s an urban area mentality.”

At Oakcity, students’ abilities were seen and treated as generally low, without much variation, by the adults around them. This view was articulated in discussions of detracking in which school adults implied that the low ability level they believed characterized their students was linked to students’ race and class backgrounds. Thus when Mr. Gray, the social studies department chair quoted in the epigraph above, described how the school went from tracked to detracked, he linked the change to the exodus of white, middle class students from neighboring communities that occurred at the same time. As those communities built their own high schools and the students left Oakcity High School, he said, there just weren’t the “varied levels” that necessitated tracking. Mr. Bartlett spoke longingly of that earlier time, saying,

...when I first started teaching here, one of my classes was academically challenging...I’d stay up until two o’clock in the morning grading their papers and tests for the next day because they challenged me...Does it mean that because we were having two sending districts to the school at the time, Oakcity and
Radishville [one of the more affluent, White communities referred to by Mr. Gray], that you had that that ability?

Among the remaining students, noted Mr. Batelli, who provided in-class support for classified students in Mr. Bartlett’s class, there did not seem to be any difference between special education and regular education students. They were, “all...somewhat on the same level.”

In this context, where the adults teaching the students saw them as all functioning at the same low level, potentially (or even actually) deviant, and unmotivated, Mr. Bartlett did not see any advantage to be gained through detracking. He reflected,

I think it’s more of a roadblock to academic success in the sense that...the only thing I see detracking do is it brings more students together, but I think it’s not on a positive level.

The following section describes the detracking practices that emerged in this context.

Teaching and learning in the detracked classroom at Oakcity High School “They have to learn a format.”

Mr. Bartlett’s understanding of his students’ abilities shaped his goals for them in the detracked class, and thus his teaching practices. Among his most important goals, he told me was to teach them “basic format” because,

... on any job they get outside of school, there’s going to be certain formats that they must follow to be successful on the job. McDonald’s, there’s a certain way of frying the French fries. There’s a certain way of customer service. They have to learn a format. That’s where I’m coming from.

Mr. Bartlett made frequent references in the classroom to students’ prospective careers as fast food workers and the connections between that future and what he was teaching them. In this vein, he emphasized certain procedures repeatedly, such as having students write their name, block5 and date in the upper right hand corner of each paper (above, rather than below the line), and never writing in pencil.

As he felt students best responded to reward and punishment, the consequences for not paying attention to format were severe, as in the
following excerpt, in which Shawna has written an assignment in pencil rather than in pen.

Shawna: [to Mr. Bartlett] Couldn’t you give me a warning?
Mr. Bartlett: Shawna, you talk too much. I’ve told you that I don’t accept pencil before.
He refuses to accept the assignment.

Much time was spent on such procedural matters, with Mr. Bartlett repeatedly chiding or criticizing students for their inattention to his formatting rules. At times, students became exasperated with this aspect of the class, and refused to redo assignments or take quizzes that Mr. Bartlett would not accept for violations of format.

In contrast with the painstaking (and high stakes) emphasis on format, Mr. Bartlett’s attention to the content and pedagogy of the course was rudimentary. As Monique, an African American ninth grader, described the curriculum,

We just talk about states, like the mid-west states, the northeast and the south and stuff. And their climate and like the natural resources and the land regions...we just read the sections that’s reviewed and like he gives us quizzes like every day. For every chapter. I mean on every section. And like every Friday you have a test.

In his class, he employed a single series of teaching activities: read a section, complete the section handout, take the section quiz, repeat daily for five days, then take the chapter test. His dedication to this method was so unwavering, that at times he lost track of where the class was in the sequence and asked students to turn in assignments they had already submitted. Once, to the exasperation of his students, he mistakenly gave the same quiz on a Friday and the succeeding Monday, without any time spent in between on reviewing the material. He covered up this mistake by referencing his authority to “check whether you did the reading.”

Mr. Bartlett rarely deviated from this pattern of seatwork, quizzing and testing, all taken straight from the textbook. He frowned on the idea of students working together, commenting “Why should her brainpower be given freely to him?” when asked about his separation of two students who were helping each other with an assignment. He complained he did not have enough time to use recommended detracking strategies such as group work, saying,
Because of the time constraint, and I know 80 minutes sounds like a large... period of time, usually it’s [assigning students to work together] just... by row, it’s a lot easier going “break you down in your row and here’s your assignment.”

Despite this claim to be short on time, large amounts of class time were wasted each day. It was not unusual for Mr. Barlett to spend 10–15 minutes getting class started at the beginning of a session, and an equivalent amount of time at the end of class during which activities tapered off and students were told they could get started on their homework. This was particularly disturbing in that, due to the block schedule structure, students were supposed to complete an entire year of social studies in one semester. The large amounts of non-instructional time in each class period in a course already compressed into one semester resulted in a truncated treatment of world history.

Despite the large amount of time in each class period that was spent on non-instructional matters, Mr. Barlett also felt he did not have the time to go in-depth on any one curricular topic, explaining that the course was “just a survey...[we] don’t get into heavy, heavy situations or content. You know, it’s the shotgun approach.” Substantive topics were treated briefly, without much attention or attempt to engage with the material. Academic discussions in the detracked class were cursory, with the teacher avoiding in-depth treatment of even potentially interesting topics. The following example is one of the most extended academic discussions observed all semester:

Mr. Bartlett: Does anyone know the difference between communism and capitalism?
Dan: In communism you don’t have a say, in capitalism you have a say.
Mr. Bartlett: Right. What about the political systems? Totalitarianism is total control of the people. What’s our system here?
Student: Authoritarian.
Dan: Democracy.
Mr. Bartlett: Yes, republican democracy. You go to the polls and vote for who you want. Take out a pen that writes. Take everything off your desk. Let’s go!

In this episode, Mr. Bartlett took a potentially rich topic, forms of government, which could have served as a jumping off point for an interesting and relevant discussion that would build students’ critical thinking
skills and content knowledge, and turned it into grist for the worksheet and test mill.

Students often resisted such treatment in subtle (and sometimes quite humorous) ways, such as the anonymous student’s called out response of “authoritarian” in the classroom exchange described above. That such minor acts of resistance were often linked to the academic content was ironic; such comments demonstrated a degree of interest in and knowledge of the course material in a setting in which students were assumed to have neither. Yet these comments, possible entry points for pursuit of relevant and engaging issues, were, generally ignored or dismissed as defiant behavior. The cursory treatment of content shown in this episode, the emphasis on testing, and the teacher’s brusque manner towards his students was typical not only of Mr. Barlett’s social studies classroom, but of classrooms throughout the school that were observed when shadowing students.

Against the backdrop of this “pedagogy of poverty,” many students worked hard to complete their assigned work, expressed the desire to do well, raised questions on topics of interest, discussed grades with peers, and showed disappointment when they did not do well. In one English class observed while shadowing Monique, the change in atmosphere was palpable when the teacher mentioned in the last few minutes of class, that they could work on poems to submit to a poetry contest. Although the students had worked diligently and in silence on the assigned task—answering six rudimentary questions about a three paragraph long newspaper article about flu season—the announcement created a flurry of excitement that made the classroom seem like an entirely different place. Students whipped poems they had been working on independently out of notebooks, back pockets and purses. They read them to each other and commented on them. In this small window of time, the students showed they were capable of far more than was being asked of them through the usual practices at Oakcity.

The detracking literature suggests that attention to students’ individual needs is an arbiter of student success in detracked settings. In the detracked classroom at Oakcity High School, however, opportunities to excel or receive support were limited by the views, described previously, of students as “all on the same level.” The detracked nature of the class led Mr. Bartlett to,

...take a central approach to giving out assignments...Centrist approach...you have to aim for the middle and pick up the lower end and the top end you don’t worry about. [They’re] going to be done before anybody else.
Mr. Batelli, whose job, despite his lack of special education training, was to support students with special education classifications, was hard pressed to describe the ways he tailored his assistance to the needs of individual students. When asked about students’ special needs and how he met them, he replied “I would say...like taking their notes, and you know, maybe some kids need help with their, you know, note-taking. Different ways of learning... [he trails off].” Mr. Gray, when asked what was provided for students who needed a challenge, noted only opportunities beyond the school, such as community college courses, or even a different choice of high schools. There were a few advanced placement courses, he noted, but “sometimes we have a hard time stocking the class.” For students struggling with the curriculum, the onus was on them to solicit assistance, either during lunch or outside of the regular school day, or even from out-of-school institutions. Local construction of student ability at Oakcity seemed to lead to instructional practices that were insensitive to individual student needs. The opportunities for students that resulted are described below.

Opportunities for students in the detracked classroom at Oakcity High School:
“*They ain’t teaching us anything new for me to understand anything.*”

As Mr. Bartlett’s classroom practices in his detracked ninth grade World History classes were characterized by rote tasks emphasizing process over substance, students had very little opportunity to display or develop competence. Students were exposed to minimal content and frequently humiliated in the class. Within this setting, doing well meant being compliant and working one’s way quickly through assigned tasks, leaving students unchallenged and discouraged.

The limited nature of the curriculum and pedagogy in the class affected student motivation. To do well in the class, you had to “do the reading, and study,” said Griselda, a 10th grade Latina student who had failed the course the previous year and was retaking it. “But I’m telling you, if I read that book I’d be going to sleep.” Mariella, a Latina ninth grader, described what they needed to do to get a good grade as “study, read, read, and read. Study.” “Do your work,” said Julio, a Latino ninth grader. Shanea, an African American ninth grader, when asked what they did in Mr. Bartlett’s class began “We learn...” and then hesitated, “work in the book,” she concluded.

Students noted the low level of curriculum, not just in Mr. Bartlett’s class, but in all of their classes. At end of the semester Monique told me, “My classes were easy, so I didn’t have a challenge, really.” This affected her desire to do well in school. She told me, in our final interview,
I used to like school last year [in middle school]. I used to want to go to school. But now, I don’t really care if I go or don’t go...I thought high school would have been fun like...do different things, but it’s the same. And that’s why it’s boring. I don’t even like it. It’s not interesting. They ain’t teaching us anything new for me to understand anything.

This affected her goals. Monique said, “I want to go to college, but...if this is boring in here I’m going to be bored in college.”

Carlos, a Latino student with a special education designation, told me that in his first semester of high school he learned “a little...It was mostly a review of what I did in eighth grade. It was just the same, same things over.” The school, he suggested “should have more money...to learn a better way.” Terah, an African American ninth grader, echoed this sentiment, saying “Most of the stuff that we did last year...we’re doing this year.”

In this setting, then, detracking failed to widen educational opportunities for students. The teaching practices in the detracked classroom, like those throughout the school, provided little to engage students or develop their skills and knowledge. Believing students to be deficient and unmotivated, they were mainly asked to display and practice rote skills and obedience to sometimes nonsensical requests. When defiance resulted, teachers’ beliefs about students were reinforced. Moreover, students’ individual needs for challenge and/or support were neglected, and the curriculum and pedagogy was bereft of opportunities for active engagement with relevant and interesting material.

Unsurprisingly, many students said they did not like detracking, and expressed the hope that a different arrangement might allow them to learn more and be less bored. Carlos told me,

I think people should be separated at speed because, you know, the fast people, down in the class, they’re going to get bored after a while. Not going to do anything. Thinking “oh, I could do this easily.” And the slow people, like the slowest ones, they might have trouble, they might need a lower class because they’re not prepared.

Jose reflected,

Some people, like, their ability could go farther than other people...the students that are remedial, they hold up the class...and then, we’re on chapter 8, but we’re supposed to be on chapter 12.
Rather than widening opportunities for students, detracking practices at Oakcity High School limited students’ possibilities, relegating them to a low level curriculum delivered in an uninspiring manner, without attention to the varied needs of students within the class.

CASE TWO: WALNUTVILLE HIGH SCHOOL

For me, the biggest positive aspect [of the detracked class] is having students interact with each other at all different levels. I mean, there’s always something to learn for someone. And the real world is not all about “I only interact with people like me.” They learn to interact with everyone. And I think that’s a big benefit for students.

-Ms. Sanders, Social studies department chair, Walnutville High School

Walnutville High School is a large, comprehensive high school in a high income suburban community. As of 2003, the student body was 88% white, 5% Asian American, 4% African American, and 2% Latino, with none of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch. The school’s students scored relatively high on the statewide proficiency exam, with only 4.5% of the students scoring in the lowest of the three categories of proficiency in language arts literacy and 28% scoring “advanced” proficiency. In mathematics, only 8.2% scored “partial” proficiency, and 45.3% “advanced.” In 2003, around 94% of the graduating seniors reported that they planned to attend either two or four year college, 1.7% planned to begin full time work, and 3.1% were undecided.

In the detracked classrooms of Walnutville High School, adults labored to create challenging and supportive educational options and opportunities leading directly to college for the majority of students, who were seen as “typical” Walnutville students. Implicit in the department chair’s words above is the notion that students at all “levels” deserved a high quality education and that learning together enhanced everyone’s educational experience. In line with this understanding, school structures and classroom practices at Walnutville were geared to meet individual student needs through in and out of class support, differentiated instruction, academic counseling, access to state-of-the-art resources, and a creative and engaging curriculum that gave students opportunities to interact and showcase a variety of skills. Students were understood to benefit from “learning to interact with everyone,” Ms. Sanders, the social studies department chair noted above.

However, at Walnutville, the category of “everyone” was bounded by
local constructions of ability, and students seen as outside of the norm, mainly students from the school’s small African American population, were educated outside of the mainstream, in self-contained special education classes that effectively segregated them from the rest of the student body during the academic portion of the school day, denying them the opportunity to benefit from detracking, as the following sections will describe.

Local constructions of ability at Walnutville High School: “High achievers.”

Ms. Stefano, a white woman in her early thirties with five years teaching experience, described her students as both high achieving and somewhat spoiled. She noted, with an air of slightly exasperated kinship, that her students were,

...usually, you know, high achievers. They want to do well. There’s a sense of entitlement. There’s probably an enormous amount of parental pressure to be the captain of the soccer team, 1600 on the SATs, going to Princeton. And the kids who say that they’re against that pressure and that that’s ridiculous are still trying to do it. ...they feel that they’re entitled to something and that they worked hard so they should get it. So their sense of what working hard is, is taking a Princeton Review class, playing soccer and you know, studying ‘til 11 o’clock at night.

This typical Walnutville student was unquestionably college bound, in the eyes of school and community adults. This notion was embodied in Walnutville’s guidance office, an impressive suite of offices with its own reception area and receptionist, ten counselors, a state-of-the-art computer system, and a systematic and sophisticated approach to the college admissions process that would rival many private prep schools. A consultant hired by the district to assess the work of Walnutville High School’s guidance office commended them on their college guidance process. He had some suggestions for how to fine-tune their efforts, said Mr. Jones, the head of the guidance office, and gave them strategies for “cultivating a little more relationship with some of the schools that the community’s interested in.” Each typical student, no matter his or her “level” had the ability to go to college—indeed, the entire school was geared to support this goal.

Many school decisions were made though the lens of students’ eventual college application packages. Ms. Stefano discussed a recent decision to raise the grade point average requirement to join the National Honor
Society because 40% of the school’s students qualified for the society. “We went to 3.75 [from 3.2]” she said, “and there was a lot of parent backlash.” Teachers agreed that the problem was grade inflation, but “…there’s a concern if you lower them, if you, if you do up the standards, if you lower the grades then the parents are going to be mad because the kids can’t get in [to college]. So it’s like a big thing.”

Ms. Sanders, the social studies department chair, described the “typical” Walnutville student as an all-American archetype, “what you would think of as a typical teenager today…nothing out of the ordinary.” For her, this “ordinary” teenager was a “middle-class, upper middle-class teenager who probably has a fairly solid family background.” This “typical” Walnutville student—upper middle class, college bound—was implicitly white, and explicitly affluent. There were, however, some lower income students and students of color at Walnutville High School. When asked about the two “feeder” middle schools to the high schools, Mr. Jones noted, with some discomfort,

The north side [of town] is more affluent, bigger homes, etc…And I would say that, just that. Yeah. I almost want to say by definition but, it, it does seem that those, those parents, not that they take more interest but, I don’t know how to put it, but the kids at North [middle school] do seem to be a little more prepared than the ones at South [middle school]. The scores on the [state wide exam]…sort of bear that out, although they have been equalizing over the years.

Race was discussed with even more discomfort. Mr. Jones explained that,

Most of the most of, let’s see, most of the African-American black students would be on the south side. Most of them would go to South. Um, the other ethnic group would be Asian and they’re sort of all over. Although most of the Asian probably go to South as well, yeah, because most of them are haven’t been long-term residents and I believe most of them live in the apartments over on South Avenue in that area there.

These comments reflected Walnutville adults’ presumed connection between race and class background and school performance.

Course placement reflected this connection, particularly in reference to students’ special education classifications. While many white students had special education classifications, and their IEPs shaped their
educational programs, these students tended to be “inclusion” students who attended mainstream classes and received support from in-class support teachers and supplementary settings designed to bolster their academic performance in mainstream classes. The school’s small African American population, however, was overrepresented in what were called “replacement” or “special services” classes, self-contained classes made up of special education students, taught outside of the mainstream by special education teachers. While such classes are not unusual, at Walnutville these classes played a segregating role in the school as a whole, and thus in the detracked classrooms as well. Mr. Jones, the guidance counselor, reported that “unfortunately...[special service classes] percentage wise have more blacks than the regular classes.”

This affected the number of African American students who were available for placement in the school’s detracked classes. Ms. Stefano, who had a total of two African American students out of her total student load of around 130 students, commented, “My classes don’t have a lot of minority students...a large percentage of minority students are in the replacement courses and classified. That kind of keeps them out of, you know they’re not in the AP classes and stuff like that.” Even within her detracked class, Ms. Stefano seemed to have different expectations for her few African American students,

...I have an African-American in my second period class but she’s great. She’s a good student, I like her. She usually gets about Cs because the work is a little...she gets Cs but she works for her Cs. Only because she doesn’t do as well on tests. I mean it’s a lot for her. She always asks for help when she needs help...she seems to have some insecurity, some fear, when she thinks she’s going to do poorly. She works hard. She did not seem discouraged throughout the whole year. She never gave up. Her work habits were not inconsistent. She was consistently a C+. Sometimes she got Bs. I mean you know. Good student.

In Ms. Stefano’s eyes, a motivated African American student was an exception at Walnutville (“but she’s great”). Her description of this “consistently C+” student as a “good student” in a school where a C+ was far below the high achieving norm also indicated a presumed connection between race and ability at Walnutville.

At Walnutville, then, the typical student was seen as college-bound, white, and upper middle class. Within this construct, the “different levels” of students found in a detracked class were seen as a strength by Walnutville adults. As Ms. Sanders noted, the interaction between
students of “all different levels” was “the biggest positive aspect of
detracking.” All “typical” Walnutville students, regardless of “level” could
reach high expectations. Lower achieving (but still “typical”) students,
even classified students in the detracked class, were not really low, but
rather were different, sometimes in interesting and beneficial ways. As
Ms. Stefano noted, the detracked class was “more fun, definitely more
fun. Most of them [lower level students] are only low in the sense that
they’re not going to be doing a lot of homework, but their mind is usu-
ally more interesting, sometimes, because they’re not just worried about
getting it right.”

The following section describes the teaching practices for detracking
that were spurred by this construction of ability at Walnutville High
School.

Teaching and learning in the detracked classroom at Walnutville High School:
Active learning and high expectations

As was consistent with the commonly held understanding of typical
Walnutville students as college-bound, Ms. Stefano held clearly articu-
lated and demanding goals for the students in her detracked ninth grade
social studies class: a college preparatory coverage of world history, rea-
soning and writing skills, the ability to construct and support an argu-
ment. She explained,

...obviously I have to curriculum-wise teach them world his-
tory…I definitely emphasize skills such as writing. So, for exam-
ple, I’m going to try and get them to develop an essay, a five-para-
graph structure and then weave that into a research paper. One
of my other goals is to teach them how to make an argument in
terms of substantiating it. Like if you have an opinion, that’s fine.
But you know, how can you support it…And basically critical
thinking is like an important thing to me because I guess, look-
ing back on my high school you don’t remember every
fact...And this year I’m going to try and do some more presenta-
tions, computer skills and creative stuff.

In accord with previously described local constructions of typical
Walnutville students, Ms. Stefano assumed that all of her students in the
detracked class, be they classified as special education students or not,
would be able to accomplish these goals. If additional assistance was
needed by some, then that was part of her role and the role of other
school personnel, but her expectations remained high for all of her students. She reflected,

...You know what? You've got to learn how to write...So as much as I understand that kids have limitations and that classification is important and the help they need is important, I don't think it's an excuse for them not to be held accountable for the same skills.

Conversely, she felt that students who were proficient at traditional school skills (i.e., writing) should be made to stretch themselves as well and “do something creative.” She felt they needed to understand “that just because they’re good at the skill that everyone says will make you go far in life doesn’t mean they don’t have to branch out.” In this way, the notion that students of different levels had something to offer each other came to life in the classroom, and Ms. Stefano’s assignments reflected this desire to showcase and foster a variety of skills.

Ms. Stefano’s practices allowed for students to participate actively in construction of knowledge, hold expertise, learn from each other and develop their own analyses. Ms. Sanders, the social studies department chair called this a “student centered” approach. She encouraged her teachers to employ this approach, as she thought it particularly useful for heterogeneous classes. Revealing both the standards set for teaching at Walnutville High School and the resources available to students and teachers, Ms. Sanders explained,

We don’t do a lot of whole class lecture type teaching. We are very much involved with student centered kinds of activities. And those activities are, I think, very conducive to heterogeneous classes...By student centered strategies I’m looking at simulation, debates, cooperative groups, research activities...a lot of our teachers are now using a mobile laptop lab to design activities for students in the classroom.

A group project on the Renaissance was a good example of Ms. Stefano’s creative and student-centered activities, and the resources available to students both at school and in their homes. In this project, students worked in small groups to both present about and lead their classmates in a hands-on activity relating to some aspect of the Renaissance. The students spent two weeks preparing for these presentations, working in class, in the library and at home. They dedicated another week to the
presentations, and then all of the students took a test based on the material presented by the other groups. Students had the opportunity to develop and display expertise through these practices, at times receiving an enthusiastic reception from their peers. After one student’s power point presentation on math and science in the Renaissance, a classmate exclaimed “He’s a Power Point master.”

By building peer collaboration and assistance into many of her classroom activities, Ms. Stefano, cultivated a sense of expertise in her students, created a positive outlet for students’ desires for social interaction in the classroom, and created space for students to learn from and with each other. During writing instruction, for example, she allowed students to solicit and provide assistance to one another. When working to construct the introductory paragraph to a five-paragraph essay, for example, students consulted one another, vetting ideas, correcting misconceptions and providing immediate feedback and encouragement to each other.

In contrast to Mr. Barlett’s punitive stance toward students at Oakcity High School, Ms. Stefano empathized with their need for social interaction, allowing them some leeway in the classroom. She noted,

...for the most part they seem to be talking about on-task things. Which I think isn’t necessarily negative... I don’t need absolute silence...Because of the style of teaching that I do, it’s not required. It is, obviously, during a test, and they do want that during a test...Part of school is social life, and I don’t want to take that away from them. I can deal with a little extra chatter.

Ms. Stefano’s detracking practices were designed to meet individual needs, be they of skill level, interest or talent. This approach was mandated by a district-wide goal of “differentiation” reaching from elementary to high school and supported through in-service days and consulting services for teachers of all subject areas. Ms. Stefano created accelerated assignments for some students and tailored scaffolds for others. She saw the variety of approaches she took in her classroom as part of this work as well, designing projects, assignments and lessons that allowed students a wide choice of formats for comprehension of the material and expression of their ideas. She explained,

...I differentiate on a daily basis...you know one day we’re doing a political cartoon and we’re drawing and one day we’re writing an essay and one day we’re having a discussion and one day we’re just taking notes. One day we’re reading and comprehending. I
try to do that often enough that different skills are being enhanced and different talents are being given.

Students responded well to this approach. Sarah, a white ninth grade student in the class who was classified as a special education student, reflected,

... I like the way Ms. Stefano teaches the class. I like the fact that she doesn’t just get up there and just teach it...we usually end up just having discussions or we do a project and then do discussions or do a presentation. And I like that better than her just getting up there and—we all got to express our opinion and everything was very debatable.

The school provided a myriad of supports and options for students with varied needs and interests, both encouraging students to access these opportunities and building them directly into the school day. For students with special education classifications, fine-tuned support from well-trained special education teachers helped them to do well in the detracked setting. Ms. Hughes, the in-class support teacher in Ms. Stefano’s classroom, described her role in the following way,

In social studies class, I am an in-class support and my role is to provide I guess additional support for the students, the classified students that need very often it is, explaining assignments, organizing assignments, modifying tests or study guides... my role is IEP driven, which means that according to, I do whatever the IEP says. So certain students get modified tests. So it’s my job to take the regular test, the regular classroom test and make whatever changes are necessary...I look at the test, I look at the classroom and trying to put together a study guide that will be helpful for the student. Help him understand. Very often I give them graphic organizers or try to present the information in a way that’s a little bit easier...Sometimes I sit in class and take notes for the students who have difficulty taking notes. And then I photocopy the notes and make sure that everyone has the notes.

This teacher’s job was to modify and broker assignments for these students, predominantly white, who had special education classifications but were part of “mainstream” classes. She was “always in contact with their teacher[s]” to ensure they received the adjustments outlined in their individualized educational plans, and in frequent contact with students’
parents to facilitate beneficial home-school communication and satisfy parent concerns.

For students with particular interest in or aptitude for social studies, a wide range of interest-based options were available as they left ninth grade and progressed through the school. Ms. Sanders noted,

...The other reason I think that there is not really or has never been really a discussion about going to tracking is because we offer so many alternatives for kids in social studies. I mean I didn’t even tell you about the other 12 elective social studies classes that we have, you know. And to me, when you give students that kind of choice, you almost eliminate the need for tracking.

Detracking, for Ms. Stefano, meant tailoring her curriculum to different needs, encouraging her to develop varied and finely-tuned teaching practices. This was difficult, and at times she wished for a simpler, tracked arrangement. She felt pressured by “the intensity of the district,” where, as she described it, “academic achievement is huge” and “teachers are expected to be knowledgeable and academically challenging.” Given this priority, she felt there was a degree of conflict inherent in the expectation that she would be able to accommodate all of her students by using differentiated instruction. She noted that there were students “who either come from out of district or who just gave up maybe in middle school and now they’re three years behind in skills.” But the expectations of the school and community focused her on this task, and she continued to work hard to create meaningful learning experiences for all of the students in her detracked classroom. The next section describes the opportunities for students that resulted.

*Opportunities for students in the detracked classroom at Walnutville High School: Engaging, college preparatory learning.*

Detracking at Walnutville had two faces. In the detracked class itself, teachers approached intellectual differences among students with sympathy, care, and commitment to bringing out the highest performance in each student. Detracking seemed to provide an impetus for teachers to create exciting and meaningful learning experiences for their students, a practice which was further supported by a school-wide understanding of Walnutville students as college bound and high achieving. However, detracking at Walnutville had not brought about racial heterogeneity. In this setting, race was assumed to be connected to academic achievement. Mainstream (mainly white) students at both ends of the academic
spectrum received special care while remaining “mainstream,” while the school’s African American students were frequently placed in non-inclusive settings—“replacement” classes that kept them out of the detracked classroom and other classes as well.

The prevailing practices of the detracked social studies class for ninth graders served to both display and develop students’ analytical skills, writing abilities, and engagement with interesting and college preparatory content. Through use of a curriculum and pedagogy that valued thinking, offered choices, developed high level skills, and gave students the opportunity to collaborate and teach peers, students’ senses of entitlement to a high quality, stimulating, college preparatory education were reinforced. Ms. Stefano and Ms. Hughes used targeted assistance and appropriate challenges to support students with “special needs.” Students in the detracked classroom—“typical” Walnutville kids—were given a rich educational experience no matter their “level.” However, students’ opportunities in the detracked classroom to interact with the full diversity of the Walnutville student population were limited. More troubling, the “typical” Walnutville student was defined in such a way that many of the school’s African American students were effectively disenfranchised from the benefits of detracking.

CASE THREE: ELMTOWN HIGH SCHOOL

One [reason for detracking] is to help better mix the students. I mean just to get a better diverse classroom, you know…definitely ethnically, but academically as well…And also, just, just kind of a more unified program. …we’re trying to make the—you know the closer connections…that kind of shared community that we’re trying to develop. This is part of that whole process—small learning communities, ninth grade academy, interdisciplinary work.

- Mr. Getty, Social studies department chair, Elmtown High School

Elmtown High School is a large, comprehensive high school in a middle to high income suburban community, serving students from diverse economic and racial backgrounds. As of 2003, the student body was 47% African American, 43% white, 5% Latino, and 4% Asian American, with 17% of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch. On the statewide proficiency exam, students’ scores fell into a bell-shaped curve. In language arts literacy, 64.2% scored “proficient,” 17.5% “partial” and 18.3% “advanced.” In mathematics, 42.7% scored “proficient,” 32.2% “partial,”
and 25.1% “advanced.” In 2003, around 92% of the graduating seniors reported that they planned to attend either two or four year college, 4.6% planned to begin full time work, and 1.9% had other, unspecified educational options in mind.

At Elmtown High School, adults saw the detracking effort as part of a larger effort to create community, bridge differences and provide greater educational opportunity for students, particularly for the school’s lower achieving students, in a racially and socioeconomically diverse setting. In a school in which students’ needs, abilities, and advantages were seen as varied and wide-ranging and the desire to serve all students well permeated the school, school structures and classroom practices were designed with the goal of accommodating many levels of students. Adults hoped to use detracking to, as Mr. Getty explained, create a “more unified program,” “closer connections,” and to “better mix the students,” for both academic and social benefit. Classroom practices in the detracked classroom reflected these concerns, emphasizing discussion, social critique and relevance in a warm setting, with particular care taken to enfranchise and consider the needs of lower achieving students and African American students in the classroom. The following sections will describe this process.

Local constructions of ability at Elmtown High School: “The diversity, the intensity…its complex.”

At Elmtown High School, adults saw the students as active, opinionated, sophisticated and, above all, varied. Mr. Carey, the social studies teacher in the focal detracked classroom at Elmtown, a white man in his thirties who grew up in the town and had graduated from Elmtown High School, described his students with affection as,

...smart, with some hobbies that they like to do. Enjoy being in school. Whether it’s just to be with your friends or whatever. Pretty much up on what to wear...definitely have opinions on a lot of things, at least in their own lives.

These lively students were embedded in an equally vibrant community. Mr. Getty, the social studies department chair, an African American man in his thirties who had also grown up in Elmtown and attended the high school explained,

Elmtown is, just kind of, we accept it for what it is but it’s not like this in other places. I mean just the diversity, the intensity. I
mean, this is my third school district, so just the level of involve-
ment and expectation and things like that. The politics. More on
the community, but it transfers to the kids…it’s high achieving,
it’s complex, it’s cosmopolitan, it’s high powered.

School adults felt this was a demanding community in which to teach,
one in which many parents were quite involved in and concerned about
their children’s educations. “It’s competitive,” Mr. Getty told me, “it’s just
like, ‘hey, if you have it and I don’t have it, I want it…and I’m going to
do what I can do to get it.’”

Although Mr. Getty described the community as “high achieving and
high powered,” school adults frequently described the students as having
a wide range of skills and abilities. Mr. Getty’s example of the sorts of stu-
dents found at Elmtown High School emphasized the two ends of the
spectrum,

…we had a girl a couple of years ago who, as a freshman, took
the AP World History exam and got a 4. You know, totally on her
own. And you are going to have kids who are reading on a third
grade level in the same class.

Rounding out this range were the “mid-level” kids who, Mr. Carey told
me, “Our administration has seen are just getting lost.” In a school with
so much perceived variation, each level had its own concern. He
reflected, “Special ed is huge here. So the low end [gets attention]. AP is
big here. So they’re harping on that middle kid.” This range led to con-
cern on the part of “high powered” parents, and Mr. Getty noted that the
teachers he hired needed to be able to both “take the hits of parent calls,”
as well as “deal with” students with low reading levels.

These differences were sometimes described as being linked to stu-
dents’ race and class backgrounds, both within the school and in the
community at large. The principal, Ms. Harris, an African American
woman in her late 50s, explained that earlier detracking efforts in ninth
grade English were made more complex by the low reading skills of some
students, “especially African American students.” To combat this, she
said, they brought in a reading skills specialist to work with students and
made space in students’ schedules for support periods. Race-linked dis-
parities dominated the concerns listed in official district publications.
The district’s top two goals for the year in which the study was conducted
were improving math achievement for all students “with particular
emphasis on closing the achievement gap” and “reducing the over-
representation of African-American males in special education.”
Detracking was seen as one way to ameliorate this division, and discussions of detracking were sometimes linked to race. Mr. Getty explained that before detracking, high and low tracks were “painfully” separated, racially speaking. Mr. Mancini, the special education teacher working in Mr. Carey’s room noted, “If they did do tracking, unfortunately, you know you’d have very, um, overwhelmingly either, um, white classes or African American classes.”

At Elmtown High School, as at Walnutville High, mixing students in a heterogeneous setting was seen as advantageous. At Elmtown, however, this benefit was seen largely as an equity-move aimed at students on the “lower end” of the academic spectrum. Ms. Green, the ninth grade guidance counselor, explained that the idea of detracking, “was to put mixed ability levels into one, you know, grade and course, and for the lower ones to be pulled up by the higher and stronger level students.”

Mr. Getty, the social studies department chair, said that the hope was that detracking would eventually lead to “a lower failure rate,” because,

the idea is that when they’re working together with other people who are more academically, you know, challenging, that’s going to, you know, rub off on the lower ability students. The lower achieving students.

The idea that detracking might benefit formerly high tracked students rarely came up, although Mr. Carey noted that he now used in the detracked class some of the practices he formerly had used only in low tracked classes (e.g., “coloring in, acting out”) and the higher achieving students “really seem to get off on it.” But, in general, he saw detracking as primarily for the benefit of his lower achieving students, and he valued this aspect of his job. Indeed, he had turned down opportunities to teach the AP classes offered to older students. “AP kids in general are already going to college,” he said. “They’re already there. I’ll help them in random sorts of ways. But these kids [struggling students] especially special ed. kids…their learning curve is gigantic.”

There was tension over the meaning and success of detracking in particular, and integration in general in the local school system. School adults felt that students took differences in stride and benefited from them. As Mr. Carey noted,

I get to a point here sometimes [when the kids are] like, “Race again? We’re always talking about race.” They know that they have white and black friends that aren’t like the stereotypes…which makes it an interesting place to go to school. Because you
have a little bit of everything and you’re exposed to a lot of things.

Some community adults, however, and affluent white parents in particular, were less convinced. In community forums, some parents complained of resources being “diverted” from their students to support remedial programs, and of certain students’ test scores lowering the overall statewide rank of the high school. In an on-line newsgroup, one parent referred to Elmtown schools as “urban schools in a suburban setting,” reflecting the notion, sometimes expressed in the group, that African American students had a deleterious effect on the local school system. Others argued back, citing the diverse, progressive school system as part of what made Elmtown unique. Perhaps for that reason, the World History course was detracked quietly over the summer. As Mr. Carey described, “the day before the first day of school last year they said, ‘by the way, this is happening.’”

In this charged setting, Mr. Carey was hesitant to associate students’ academic performance with their racial backgrounds. He emphasized the high performance of his African American students in his discussions with me, referring to two African American students and one Egyptian American student when I asked him at the beginning of the year which students stood out academically thus far. He told me,

Uh, I couldn’t tell without looking here [in his gradebook] who really is standing out grade wise. But I know that Michelle talks every class. Like just for example, Fatima hardly speaks but she gets top quiz grades. And Latrice in the back row has caught me off-guard and done well on quizzes.

At Elmtown, then, students were seen as varied – racially diverse and working at many ability levels. School adults wanted students to learn from each other, and for lower achieving students to benefit from working alongside their higher achieving peers. There was tension in both school and community around presenting detracking as an equity move to benefit particular groups of students, and a hesitation to stereotype students by linking race with achievement. The following section describes the teaching practices that emerged within such a view.

Teaching and learning in the detracked classroom at Elmtown High School: Relevant, interactive, and accessible.

In a school which was attempting to prioritize equitable opportunities for
students, who were seen by school adults as having widely varying skills and abilities, Mr. Carey emphasized a curriculum and pedagogy designed to provoke thought, hold interest, foster participation and be accessible to each member of the classroom. In this self-consciously diverse community, Mr. Carey’s curriculum focused on exploring issues of culture and power, as well as topics of local and current political interest. Instructional strategies emphasized discussion, variety, and open-ended tasks. The teacher’s practices addressed the needs of struggling students, alongside effective support from special education teachers both within and outside of the classroom.

Mr. Carey felt that one of his primary goals for his students was help them to develop greater cultural awareness and a more enlightened understanding of difference. “I generally want to change them,” he said, speaking of his objectives for his ninth grade students, “I want them not to be jerks.” This aim was evident in his approach to World History, which he taught more as a global anthropology course than as the broad overview of western history common in high school World History courses. In contrast with the textbook focused curriculum at Oakcity and the chronological approach taken in Walnutville, Mr. Carey’s self-generated curriculum focused on an exploration of culture and power, with frequent links to topics of local concern and current geopolitical import.

Mr. Carey began the year with a unit on geography, then a unit on human origins, then followed up with a unit designed to introduce students to the study of culture, “…just the awareness of what culture is, that it’s different all over the place…the process of understanding the differences,” then a unit on social class, before embarking on the region-focused units that would fill the rest of the year. His constantly evolving curriculum included a unit on Africa from colonialism to current day, a unit on Latin America focusing on different forms of government, a unit on the Middle East that focused on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and unit on social class that involved students in trying to understand the role of economic differences in U.S. culture. He brought in films, slides, and readings from a variety of sources to address these topics.

Tarik, an African American ninth grader, noted the difference from what he expected,

Well, first of all, I thought World History would be like studying the world, the history of like the world and stuff about like the history of China, history of Japan, the history of like the Middle East and history of like all the Latin countries but, um, well, pretty much it’s kind of better than I expected. Because first of all, we are trying to like study like early civilizations. I like how we
started out with those …. Right now we’re doing features of civilizations. We’re trying to really touch base on social class right now. Really big.

In his curriculum, Mr. Carey attempted to dispel stereotypes about the third world, something not lost on his students. One student, an African American girl named Jasmine, told me about a unit on Africa they had just completed. She told me,

People had lots of stereotypes about Africa before they began the unit, like that people in Africa were all running around naked, that Africa was all desert, that there were lots of wild animals there. It’s not true, though. In Africa there are big cities, they are very advanced, there are smart people there. The only reason they have less is because the British came in and changed the way they farmed and told them what to do. We spent a long time on Africa. We did a lot of different things. It was fun. He showed us slides—he’s been there.

By focusing attention on an understudied region of the world (at least by high school students) and confronting preconceptions about Africa, Mr. Carey both challenged his students to reconsider stereotypes and assumptions, and, significant for students who felt a cultural or historical connection with the continent, validated Africa as worthy of significant and serious treatment in the curriculum.

Mr. Carey enlivened the class by using slides, handouts, films, photographs and artifacts, some of which he had gathered during his extensive travels abroad. During one class session he projected slides that he had taken during a trip to Ghana in order to illustrate some of the concepts the class was studying, including cultural diffusion, ethnocentrism, and subculture. Diana, Michael, Michelle and Jasmine, four African American students, and Scott, a white student, collectively pondered why a slide of a Ghanaian barbershop had a picture in the window of a black man with a fade haircut and goatee, and the caption “Enter America.” “Couldn’t it be because there are so many American movies?” Michelle posited. “Mmm hmm,” he replied, and then queried the class, “A group of Americans hanging out in Ghana would be what?” “A subculture,” Scott replied.

Mr. Carey built on his personal knowledge of Elmtown to connect abstract social studies concepts to locally relevant themes, not shying away from discussion of the race and class differences that sometimes spurred conflict in the town. In one class session he showed the students
a slide in which one black child stood amid a large group of white children, all wearing formal, old-fashioned looking clothing. He explained that the photograph was a class of students in Elmtown from early in the previous century.

Mr. Carey: Elmtown is an interesting example. In many towns the servants, who were often African American, were not allowed to live in the same town. In Elmtown they were allowed to live in town, and lived on the south side, where there were many Italian workers too.

Jasmine: That’s where we still live! Why we still live there?

Michelle: I can apply acculturation. [Referring to the slide] The way they dress. Certain kids didn’t dress that way, then they learned to from each other.

He felt that this method was more engaging for the students. “They’re more interested,” he said, “because its right in their [lives], they’ll see it when they walk out of the classroom.” Students became very excited when Mr. Carey used these sorts of local examples, and the room would ring with voices vying to be heard.

The episodes described briefly above also reveal the high value on student participation in Mr. Carey’s classroom. His primary mode of instruction was an interactive lecture format, in which he presented material and led the class in exploring it. The result was that a variety of voices were heard in his classroom; students from varied backgrounds had opportunities to display their engagement and knowledge, to develop speaking skills, and to actively consider the course material. Yvonne, who was classified as a special education student, understood this emphasis, saying that in to be successful in Mr. Carey’s class, “What you have to do is you have to speak.” It was important to him that everyone felt able to speak. He told me he was “very conscious of peripheral people,” and strove “to keep a general atmosphere where…they can say what they want.”

Along with creating a safe space that emphasized participation of all students, Mr. Carey worked to develop personal connections with students as a means of bringing them into the classroom community, diagnosing emerging problems, and helping students who were having personal or academic troubles. He said,

I work hard at relating to kids … [I do that by] talking about myself. Bring up Elmtown. Eye contact. Try to stand at the door
and say “hello” and “goodbye.” Just things like that. “How was your game yesterday?” “What did you get on the biology test you were studying for in my class?”

He was an experienced athletics coach, and felt this orientation was fundamental to his teaching approach. He tried to know his students well and encourage them, “…because I coach, and that’s the way I coach.” The better he knew a student, the more chance he had of reaching him or her, he felt. “I wish I could spend weeks just getting to know the kids,” he told me, “because then when you hear something, you can tie in a kid that’s not talking at all, but you know that he likes Cajun food [for example].” He directly addressed students who were doing poorly. If a student wasn’t doing his or her work, “I talk, pull him over,” telling the student “what’s up with this? You [ve] got to know if it keeps going, I’ve got to make a call home.” He was concerned with “the social, the emotional” aspects of his students, and felt that “if you choose to pay attention, the kid will give you a lot of information” about what was going on with him or her.

His approach to the dilemmas of academic difference in his detracked classroom was rooted in developing a varied and flexible curriculum that students with a variety of skill levels could comfortably engage in. This resulted in activities that were active and open-ended and a flexible approach to assessment. He paid particular attention to the needs of lower achieving students, saying, that one of his biggest challenges was “trying to keep the lower end up,” and he found himself “constantly rephrasing questions,” and trying to “make it much more simpler, and break it down.” Mr. Mancini, who was an experienced special education teacher, commended Mr. Carey’s approach saying,

I think we take time to know the students individually and I think you know I think that really helps. …you have to do different things in the class. You know you can’t sit there and do notes and lecture all the time. You have to have activities; you have to keep the kids moving around…you have to have different ways of assessing them, too. You…have to give them a chance to, to talk, you know have projects you know act scenarios out because not the entire picture of the student can’t be told from the test scores.

In addition to providing opportunities for students to talk and “act out scenarios,” Mr. Carey took a flexible approach to grading his students, particularly those who worked hard but did poorly on tests. “You gather
all the numbers,” he told me, “and that’s when I tend to finagle a few students into a higher grade.”

The school offered further support to students with special education classifications. Mr. Mancini explained that each special education teacher had a roster of 12 to 15 students. The teacher’s role was to be an “advocate” for those students, to stay in contact with their parents, to send out progress reports, interface with the students’ other teachers, help them with their assignments in all of their classes. The special education teachers saw each of their students daily, either in an inclusion class or a support class. Mr. Mancini described the role of the special education teacher towards his or her charges,

I mean it’s like a… those students are almost like, they’re like your children. I mean you’re following them around, you’re checking up on them. You’re, you’re always asking them how they’re doing in class…I know where my students are throughout the entire day.

This advocacy and support role included helping students to communicate with teachers, modifying assignments, creating a long range plan for each student, and monitoring the implementation of the student’s IEP.

Within the detracked classroom, Mr. Mancini had specific strategies to assist classified students, whose principal difficulties he felt to be “comprehension skills,” study skills, and writing skills. He worked closely and discreetly with students in Mr. Carey’s classroom, “slipping” them an easier reading on the day’s topic, providing them with review packets to prepare for tests and quizzes, and helping to structure groups for classroom activities and facilitate communication within them between “higher functioning” and “lower functioning” kids. He provided students with graphic organizers to help them comprehend the complex material being covered in class, helped students stay organized and on top of their work, and gave hands-on assistance for students grappling with Mr. Carey’s frequent writing assignments. All of this was essential to the success of these students in the detracked setting as they grappled with practices which asked much more from them than those in a regular level class, which they would have been placed in had social studies been tracked.

In contrast with the more targeted approach to the needs of struggling students in the detracked classroom, the needs of students who excelled were mainly addressed through what Mr. Getty called “different levels of expectation.”
I think you can give an assignment or an activity or something and just have, you know, that students are going to have different levels of expectation...something where a lower ability student is going to be able to just kind of get the basics...The higher level student is going to be able to, you know, read the nuances and develop different questions and answer in different ways...I’d like to think that an activity like that kind of runs into our range, that basically a student’s going to rise to their level of ability.

Rather than the differentiated approach applied at Walnutville, where students sometimes received different readings and assignments based on skill and interest, the Elmtown approach favored the creation of assignments and assessments that were flexible enough to meet the needs of students with varying strengths. Mr. Getty felt that the school district could do a better job, however, at training teachers in and implementing a more differentiated approach in the detracked classrooms, to really support and challenge students with differing needs. Differentiating, he told me, sometimes was misinterpreted by school leaders as the equivalent to paying attention to cultural diversity.

...that’s I think a place where we have to improve. You know, we talk about differentiating instruction. We’ve had people...workshops and training on cultural diversity and culturally responsive learning...But differentiated, my understanding is that differentiated is really dealing at the different levels.

Perhaps in response to the previously mentioned concern about the academic performance of African American students coupled with a hesitancy to equate race with ability, training for teachers in detracked classrooms (and district-wide trainings in general) had focused on approaches that would foster cultural sensitivity in teachers’ work with racially and ethnically diverse groups of students, rather than approaches to varied abilities.

Mr. Getty noted that some parents of high achieving students had raised issues with the detracked course, saying that their children were bored. “Parents have a problem,” he said, “much more of a problem with it than kids. There are some students like, ‘I’m not challenged’…but usually it’s pretty cool in terms of the students and who they’re with.” Mr. Carey’s strategies for reaching “bored” or frustrated students hinged on his personal relationship with them rather than on a “differentiated” approach such as that employed in Walnutville’s detracked classrooms. These students “become a challenge as well,” he reflected. Ken, a white
student who completed his work easily, stopped turning in homework assignments at one point. Mr. Carey asked him what was going on, and he responded “I don’t know. Too boring.” “All right. That’s truthful,” said Mr. Carey to me. Like Ken, Scott felt a bit bored in World History too, saying,

A lot of times in social studies they would teach us stuff that I kind of already knew...he taught it too slow...like he spent so long on Africa, and I don’t think it was necessary.

When asked why he thought this was he responded, “Probably because the kids didn’t really understand it...they want everyone at the same level.” To meet the needs of a student who felt he or she wasn’t being challenged, Mr. Carey paid some attention to them, “just give him a little more of your time.” He would talk to students outside of class, and said “you do some of your best teaching in the hallway.” If the situation was critical, he would call home. These strategies focused on trouble-shooting students’ poor performance rather than providing challenging options. Mr. Carey did not provide structured challenges for students who had already mastered some of the skills and materials, nor was he instructed to or supported in doing so by the department chair or larger school structure. This seemed to be the flip side of the inclusive classroom created by Mr. Carey to enfranchise lower achieving students, as will be explored in the following section.

Opportunities for students in the detracked classroom at Elmtown High School: Enfranchisement and social critique.

In his detracked ninth grade World History class, Mr. Carey’s classroom practices emphasized students’ development of cultural understandings and analyses. In validating class and race as topics of inquiry, Mr. Carey enfranchised students who might be left out of a more Eurocentric approach. His approach to grading and to providing accommodations and entry-points within the curriculum allowed students who struggled academically to keep up. His discussion-oriented approach created a classroom in which opinion and expression were given space, fostering engagement and showcasing the academic competence of students with varying achievement levels and race and class backgrounds.

In line with Mr. Carey’s commitment to building personal connections with his students, his primary approach to the differing academic needs of his students was to create assignments that he felt would engage students working at various levels and to be “flexible” in how he assessed
students he felt had differing abilities. Some students who were tracked high in their other classes expressed frustration with the pace of the class. It seems possible that in a setting in which detracking was bound up in issues of race and integration, issues that were the source of some degree of conflict in the community, the frank discussion of students’ academic strengths and weaknesses that a differentiated approach would have required was avoided in favor of a less considered approach to students who needed more challenge within the curriculum. Detracking, in this setting, however, reshaped the curriculum and pedagogy of the class in ways that provided students opportunities to engage in social critique, creating a setting in which all students were encouraged to actively engage in discussions and see themselves as part of an intellectual community considering important local and international issues.

**IMPLICATIONS**

This cross-case comparison study reveals some of the complexities of translating a structural reform into change that is meaningful for students. In so doing, this analysis uncovers many of the institutional and classroom practices that either assisted or undercut the development of detracked classrooms that enhanced students’ educational opportunities. This section draws out these understandings, considering the implications of each of the three cases for the implementation of detracking reform in ways that can benefit students. These cases illustrate that effective detracking involves changes at multiple levels: in institutional structures, classroom practices, and teacher and student beliefs about ability (Rubin, 2006).

In Oakcity, amid adult views of students as deficient and institutional structures that were unresponsive to student needs, detracking reform had no discernable positive effect on instruction. In this poor urban setting, school adults saw students as all the same—low skilled, unmotivated and prone to deviance. In this context, a reform intended to raise the quality of education for marginalized students was submerged by larger problems common to urban settings. These include persistent deficit discourses, low level curriculum, poor teaching, and an institutionalized lack of access for students to both academic support and challenge due to limited course selection, inadequate guidance counseling, and a chaotic special education program, among other factors.

A “pedagogy of poverty” combined with macroeconomic factors that maintain impoverished conditions in urban schools and communities, subverts the aims of many well-intentioned reform efforts (Anyon, 1997, 2005; Haberman, 1991; Lipman, 1998). In such settings, a school-based
structural reform like detracking can only be meaningful when implemented with a host of other changes that develop school structures to truly support students’ needs; promote instructional practices that stimulate, challenge and encourage young people; and radically expand teachers’ beliefs about their students’ abilities. Students in both tracked and detracked classes in schools like Oakcity are sorely in need of such changes. This case reveals some of the deep-seated and intertwining problems in urban schools that make them so resistant to reform.

In Walnutville, adults’ beliefs that the “typical” Walnutville student was college-bound and high achieving were connected to detracking practices that stimulated and met the varied needs of students in the classroom. This setting exemplified many of the positive effects of detracking. Students who had special education designations but were “mainstreamed” into the detracked classroom had broader opportunities than they would have had in the lower track classes to which they would have been assigned in a tracked institution. The quality of instruction for all students in the detracked class was improved by a curriculum and pedagogy based on concepts of multiple intelligences, differentiation, and active learning that was supported through resources, training, and voiced ideological commitment by school and departmental administrators.

Such practices led to a classroom environment that was innovative and engaging for students. Intellectual variation among “typical” (constructed as mainly white and upper middle class) students was seen as acceptable; these students were understood to all be college bound and deserving of an appropriately targeted, college preparatory education. Students who were not seen as typical, however, often did not have access to the opportunities provided by detracking. Exclusion from these opportunities compounded the isolation of the school’s small African American population, becoming, arguably, part of the “cumulative privileging quietly loaded up on whites” that Fine argues is part of the creation of racial inequalities (1997, p. 57). A lack of racial diversity can compromise the benefits of detracked environments for all students; the exchange of ideas that can take place racially and socioeconomically diverse classroom is fundamental to the reform and difficult to achieve in less diverse setting. Schools like Walnutville, which are predominantly white and wealthy, run the risk of constructing normalcy in a way which excludes students who do not fit the majority profile. Such schools must examine their grouping practices, particularly the assignment of students to special education settings. They must develop strategies for moving students into mainstream settings, utilizing their considerable resources and well developed support structures to benefit underserved students,
thereby providing students greater access to the high quality learning experiences to be had in the detracked classrooms of such schools. This case also indicates the need for teachers in such schools to be trained to deal with issues of race and class with sensitivity as notions of the “typical” are expanded and white privilege is challenged by diverse perspectives.

In Elmtown, the adults’ sense of excitement about student diversity and their desire to provide opportunity to all students resulted in a detracking approach that encouraged critical thought, emphasized relevance, and focused on enfranchising lower achieving students. At Elmtown, school adults spoke frequently of the diversity of the school and community, and hoped detracking would help to close a noticeable “achievement gap” between white and African American students. In this setting, adults in the detracked classroom provided opportunities for students to engage in discussions of culture and class, while shying away from a differentiated approach that might have highlighted differences in achievement.

In many ways, Mr. Carey closely resembled the successful teachers of African American students described by Ladson-Billings (1994), seeing himself as part of the community and aiming to “help students make connections between their local, national, racial, cultural and global identities” (p. 25). This “culturally relevant” and inclusive approach helped him to connect with and enfranchise the diverse students in his classroom, strategies that may be particularly useful in diverse detracked settings. As at Walnutville, the detracked classroom provided an opportunity for mainstreamed special education students to take part in a high quality learning experience rather than being relegated automatically to the lowest track of the social studies curriculum. The desire to meet the needs of varied students resulted in a richer, more interesting curriculum for all of the students in the class, although the classroom suffered from a lack of attention to some students’ need for some more challenging assignments. This points to the need train teachers in detracked classrooms to create curricula and utilize pedagogy that challenges all students and continues to enfranchise them; methods that promote access, provide both support and challenge, and build upon diverse perspectives.

Both Walnutville and Elmtown demonstrate how close attention to needs of struggling students, support for teachers, and teaching practices predicated upon an expanded understanding of ability can increase the effectiveness of detracking reform. In detracked classrooms, close monitoring of students who find the curriculum to be more challenging
and scaffolding of assignments and instruction can help students access a higher level curriculum than would otherwise be available to them. Assignments and projects that are open-ended in nature, coupled with the availability of more difficult texts and extension assignments allow all students to be adequately challenged. Support for teachers in detracked settings through training, additional resources and the availability of trained staff to assist in the classroom is critical. Expanded understandings of ability stimulate a more varied range of teaching practices that showcase the talents of more students, helping students to expand their own understandings of the skills and experiences that are valuable in the classroom. Walnutville and Elmtown encompassed many of these aspects of effective detracking; demonstrating, to an extent, the reform’s potential to expand opportunities for students.

CONCLUSION

Classroom based research can reveal links between micro and macro levels of social relations, lending insight into how uneven educational opportunities for students are produced both among and within schools, despite attempts at equity geared reform. In each of the three schools analyzed in this study, local beliefs about students and their abilities shaped the implementation of detracking reform. The classroom and institutional practices framed by these local constructions of ability played a part in producing opportunities for students in each setting. This attention to how local constructions of ability shape reform challenges the one-size-fits-all, testing and punishment approach to school reform that prevails in the current era of high-stakes “accountability.” The notion that less tangible aspects of a local context can dramatically shape reform raises troubling questions about disparities in instructional and institutional responses to current accountability imperatives that may arise in divergent school contexts.

While detracking holds promise for excellence and equity, as described in other articles in this special issue (e.g., Boaler & Staples, this issue; Burris, Welner, Wiley & Murphy, this issue), the case studies presented in this analysis demonstrate that for the reform to create meaningful change for students, reformers must proceed with careful attention to multiple facets of the local context. Successful detracking incorporates change on a variety of levels: the modification of school structures to provide access to detracking and support and resources to students and teachers involved in detracking efforts, the alteration of classroom
practices and curriculum to provide instruction appropriate to heterogeneous settings, and the transformation of students’ and teachers’ belief systems about learning and ability. When such changes occur simultaneously, the results for students are remarkable.

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## APPENDIX

### Table 1: Study Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Oakcity</th>
<th>Walnutville</th>
<th>Elmtown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of students</td>
<td>931</td>
<td>1,410</td>
<td>1,655</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
<td>35% African American</td>
<td>4% African American</td>
<td>47% African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2% White</td>
<td>88% White</td>
<td>43% White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>61% Latino</td>
<td>2% Latino</td>
<td>5% Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1% Asian American</td>
<td>5% Asian American</td>
<td>4% Asian American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEP * Students</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Diversity **</td>
<td>61.5% Spanish</td>
<td>91.9% English</td>
<td>96% English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36.7% English</td>
<td>1.9% Spanish</td>
<td>1.2% Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.8% Other languages</td>
<td>5.9% Asian languages</td>
<td>2.8% Other languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with IEPs*</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free/reduced lunch elig.</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community income indices, rounded to nearest 100</td>
<td>Median household income: 36,100</td>
<td>Median household income: 98,400</td>
<td>Median household income: 74,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Per capita income: 14,300</td>
<td>Per capita income: 47,200</td>
<td>Per capita income: 44,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percent in poverty: 27</td>
<td>Percent in poverty: 2.7</td>
<td>Percent in poverty: 5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance on statewide exam</td>
<td>Language Arts Literacy</td>
<td>Language Arts Literacy</td>
<td>Language Arts Literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Partial 44.4%</td>
<td>Partial 4.5%</td>
<td>Partial 17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Proficient 51.9%</td>
<td>Proficient 67.5%</td>
<td>Proficient 64.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advanced 3.7%</td>
<td>Advanced 28%</td>
<td>Advanced 18.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Partial 68.7%</td>
<td>Partial 8.2%</td>
<td>Partial 32.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Proficient 28%</td>
<td>Proficient 46.5%</td>
<td>Proficient 42.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advanced 3.3%</td>
<td>Advanced 45.3%</td>
<td>Advanced 25.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAT Results</td>
<td>51% taking test</td>
<td>99% taking test</td>
<td>87% taking test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Math 434</td>
<td>Math 588</td>
<td>Math 522</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Verbal 412</td>
<td>Verbal 562</td>
<td>Verbal 523</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td># of subjects: 6</td>
<td># of subjects: 21</td>
<td># of subjects: 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td># scoring 3 or above: 5</td>
<td># scoring 3 or above: 369</td>
<td># scoring 3 or above: 176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-high school plans (self-reported)</td>
<td>4-year college 19.8%</td>
<td>4-year college 83.9%</td>
<td>4-year college 80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2-year college 30%</td>
<td>2-year college 9.6%</td>
<td>2-year college 12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other educ. 7%</td>
<td>Other educ. .8%</td>
<td>Other educ. 1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work 25%</td>
<td>Military .3%</td>
<td>Military 1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other 18%</td>
<td>Work 1.7%</td>
<td>Work 4.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Focal Students – Oakcity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Monique</th>
<th>Shawna</th>
<th>Jose</th>
<th>Edelmira</th>
<th>Carlos</th>
<th>Ana</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/eth</td>
<td>African Am.</td>
<td>African Am.</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Latina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>English Health</td>
<td>Lang. Arts Health</td>
<td>Health Metals</td>
<td>ROTC</td>
<td>English Health</td>
<td>English Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classified</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Focal Students – Walnutville

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sarah</th>
<th>William</th>
<th>Adam</th>
<th>Karen</th>
<th>Greg</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/eth</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fgn. Lang.</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Spanish IIH</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>Italian I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Rel.</td>
<td>Acad. Lab</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Acad. Lab</td>
<td>BSIP Math</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classified</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Focal Students – Elmtown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Scott</th>
<th>Michelle</th>
<th>Yvonne</th>
<th>Nicole</th>
<th>Tarik</th>
<th>Aya</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/eth</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>African Am.</td>
<td>African Am.</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>African Am.</td>
<td>Pakistani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fgn. Lang.</td>
<td>Spanish II H</td>
<td>Spanish II</td>
<td>Spanish I H</td>
<td>Spanish II H</td>
<td>Spanish II H</td>
<td>ESL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Rel.</td>
<td>Read/Write</td>
<td>HSPA Review</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classified</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5: Adults Interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Oakcity</th>
<th>Walnutville</th>
<th>Elmtown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focal Teacher</strong></td>
<td>Mr. Bartlett, male, early 50's</td>
<td>Ms. Stefano, female, early 30's</td>
<td>Mr. Carey, male, mid 30's</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White, Over 10 years teaching</td>
<td>White, female, 5 years</td>
<td>White, male, 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Department chair</strong></td>
<td>Mr. Gray, male, mid 50's</td>
<td>Ms. Sanders, female, 40's</td>
<td>Mr. Getty, African American, 30's</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White, Over 20 years teaching</td>
<td>White, female, Over 20 years</td>
<td>White, Over 10 years teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>In-Class Support</strong></td>
<td>Mr. Batelli, male, late 20's</td>
<td>Ms. Hughes, African American,</td>
<td>Mr. Mancini, White, male,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>First year teaching</td>
<td>female, early 40's</td>
<td>early 30's, Over 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Over 10 years teaching</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Guidance Counselor</strong></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Mr. Jones, White, mid 50's</td>
<td>Ms. Green, African American,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>female, early 30's</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes**

1. I consider all three of the classes I studied in this project to be detracked in that they resulted from a decision to have only one level of social studies at the ninth grade level and ninth grade students were randomly assigned to social studies classes in each school. Whether or not these classes are detracked in an ideal or effective manner is discussed at length in this article.

2. Pseudonyms are used for the names of all people and places in this article.

3. This is a standard measure of socioeconomic status in schools.

4. The three categories are “partial,” “proficient” and “advanced.”

5. “Block” refers to the double periods for instruction at Oakcity High School. With this “block” scheduling, each class was 80 minute long, and an entire course lasted a semester rather than a year.

6. Haberman (1991) describes an unrelenting “pedagogy of poverty” in urban settings that includes an adherence to teaching low level skills, a directive, teacher-centered teaching style, and a focus on the completion of rote tasks, all within a punitive environment.

7. Curriculum differentiation is a term used to describe a curricular approach that provides individualized opportunities to students, based on skill and interest, within a heterogeneous setting.

8. As noted earlier, most comprehensive high schools educate a small portion of their special education students in self-contained classrooms, after determining that for either academic or behavioral reasons these students cannot be effectively included in mainstream classrooms. At Walnutville, however, in contrast with the two other study schools (both of which also had such classes), these self-contained classes (called “replacement” or “special services” classes in this school) greatly diminished the diversity of the school’s detracked classrooms, keeping many of the school’s already small proportion of African American students out of these classrooms.

9. Limited English Proficient

10. Refers to first language spoken at home in order of frequency.

11. Includes (in order of frequency) Others, Creole, Arabic, Panjabi.
12 Includes (in order of frequency) Korean, Mandarin, Cantonese, Taiwanese, Vietnamese.
13 Includes (in order of frequency) Others, Patois, French, Arabic, Bengali, Farsi.
14 Individualized Educational Program, indicating a special education classification.
15 Math at Oakcity High School proceeds: Algebra, Geometry. Algebra A is for students who scored low on the grade eight proficiency assessment.
16 Due to block scheduling, Oakcity students took only 4 classes a semester. “Next semester” courses were taken after our data collection at Oakcity High School was completed.
17 I have included students’ other classes (in addition to World Civ., the focal class) to give a sense of what Oakcity students’ school days were like.
18 Classified as special education student.
19 Self identifies as Puerto Rican.
20 Self identifies as Hispanic, adopted from Columbia, with “American” parents.
21 Math at Walnutville proceeds: Algebra, Geometry, Algebra II. Pre-Algebra is remedial.
22 “H” is “honors.” There is no “high honors” level at Walnutville.
23 At Walnutville, Biology is considered more rigorous than Earth Science.
24 Remedial, advanced or otherwise unusual courses.
25 “Academic Lab” is a support class for “inclusion” students (have IEPs but are mainstreamed).
26 This is a twice weekly review session for students in danger of failing the HSPA.
28 “HH” is “high honors.”
29 At Elmtown, Biology is considered more rigorous than Geophysical Science.
30 Remedial reading and writing course.
31 For students in danger of failing math HSPA.

References


*Education Digest.* (March 2004). Tracking trounces test scores. 15–17.


BETH C. RUBIN, assistant professor of education at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, uses a sociocultural lens and an interpretive research methodology to examine issues relating to educational equity in U.S. schools, with a focus on the intersection between classroom life and larger social inequalities. Her current research explores detracking in the classrooms of diverse schools, and youth civic identity. Recently published work includes “‘There’s still not justice’: Youth civic identity development amid distinct school and community contexts,” Teachers College Record (2007), “Learner identities amid figured worlds: Constructing (in)competence at an urban high school,” The Urban Review (2007), and Civic education for diverse citizens in global times: Rethinking theory and practice (Erlbaum, 2007).