“Laboratories of Democracy”: A Situated Perspective on Learning Social Studies in Detracked Classrooms

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Abstract
Many of the primary aims of social studies education mesh with detracking reformers’ goals of creating more equitable and democratic learning environments. However, little empirical data exist on detracked social studies classrooms. This article reports the results of a qualitative, cross-case comparison study of detracking in the ninth grade social studies classrooms of three public high schools. Employing a situated perspective on learning, it describes how the practices of two of the three detracked classrooms constituted learning in ways that allowed students to experience democratic exchange and develop civic skills and orientations. Detracked social studies classrooms have potential to be the “laboratories of democracy” Dewey describes, but only if detracking is accompanied by a shift in how knowledge and learning are constituted through discourse and practice in the classroom.

Introduction

“…Philosophically, the feeling in the [social studies] department has always been that if we were to have democratic classrooms, it should be social studies. And that the kinds of issues and topics that we deal with in social studies are issues and topics that are very conducive to having good discussions with a wide variety of student levels.”

– Social studies department chair, Walnutville High School

As this comment indicates, many educators feel that social studies classrooms are a natural place to begin the work of dismantling ability grouping. Many of the aims of social studies educators - to teach civic processes and values, to study culture and society, and to train students to be critical thinkers - mesh with detracking reformers’ goals of creating more equitable and democratic learning environments. Indeed, in 1992, the National Council for the Social Studies publicly stated its
opposition to ability grouping. Yet, despite the growing body of work attending to the particularities of detracking and heterogeneous grouping in specific content areas, empirical study of teaching and learning in detracked social studies classrooms is limited.

This article is based on data collected during a year-long cross-case comparison study of detracking in the ninth grade social studies classrooms of three public high schools in the United States. Employing a situated perspective on learning that posits learning and knowledge as shaped through participation in social practices, this article considers how detracking shapes learning in social studies classrooms. In two of the three schools studied, detracking fostered a democratized construction of learning and knowledge; that is, the discourses and practices of these classrooms facilitated students' development of skills, values, and orientations essential to democratic life. In this article, I argue that detracked social studies classrooms have the potential to be the “laboratories of democracy” described by Dewey (1938/1965), but only if detracking is accompanied by a shift in how knowledge and learning are constituted through the discourse and practices of the classroom.

The article begins with a description of this study’s placement at the intersection of three distinct fields of research: tracking and detracking, democratic education, and situated learning. The next section outlines the methodology used for data collection and analysis during this year-long, multi-site study. The section that follows presents the findings, focusing on how learning was constituted in the three schools, the challenges faced in these settings, and school-based practices that proved effective for supporting democratized learning in two of the three detracked classrooms. A final section discusses the implications of these findings for social studies educators, teacher educators and future research.

Background

Tracking and Detracking

The sorting and grouping of students for instruction by perceived ability 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 (Mehan, 1992, 1996; Oakes, 1985, 1992; Slavin, 1991, 1995; among others). In integrated schools, the separation of low income students of color from their white, higher income peers through track placement effectively re-segregates these school settings in a practice sometimes referred to as second generation segregation (Mickleson, 2005). Mickleson
notes that due to this practice, “Black and Latino students are far more likely to be in the low-track classes where their opportunities to learn are limited relative to high track classes” (2005, p. 51). The separation of students along race and class lines and the unequal opportunities resulting from this separation put tracking as an institutional arrangement at odds with the democratic purposes of schooling. This will be discussed in more detail below.

Detracking is the dismantling of ability-driven tracks and the placement of students into classes that are intentionally heterogeneous in terms of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, perceived ability and previous achievement. Fine, Weis, and Powell (1997) argue that such integrated spaces can become “communities of difference,” multiracial communities that are “rich in racially and ethnically diverse connections and difference” and hold the possibility of “racial democracy, social challenge and intellectual stretch from which public education has long walked away” (p. 279). In integrated schools that are re-segregated through tracking, detracking can re-integrate students, resulting in racially and socioeconomically diverse learning environments with the potential to provide opportunity to a broader range of students.

There has been a spate of research on detracking over the past few decades. A number of recent classroom-based quantitative studies found positive results for detracking and heterogeneous grouping, particularly for lower attaining students (Ireson, Hallam, Hack, Clark & Plewis, 2002; Klingner, Vaughn & Schumm, 1998; Venkatakrishnin & Wiliam, 2003). Other researchers argue that detracking does not produce the anticipated results (Gamoran & Weinstein, 1998; Loveless, 1999). A few studies of detracking, more interpretive in methodology and orientation, document the social, cultural, and political dimensions of the reform (e.g., Oakes, Wells, Jones & Datnow, 1997; Rubin, 2003; Wells & Serna, 1996; Yonezawa, Wells & Serna, 2002).

Some of the most striking results are in schools that have implemented detracking across the entire curriculum. Garrity (2004) reports that, after detracking all subjects at South Side High in Rockville Centre, New York, the school’s African American and Latino students were almost as likely as White and Asian American students to take calculus. In this school, 71% of low-income students passed the state’s Regents exam, and the Regents diploma rate rose to 90%. Welner, Burris, Wiley, and Murphy (in press) report the continued impressive results of detracking coupled with a challenging curriculum at this remarkable high school. Alvarez and Mehan (2006) describe the success of the Preuss School on the University of California, San Diego campus, whose students, all of whom must come from low-income families, are enrolled in a single college preparatory track. The school’s first graduating class had a 100% college attendance rate, with 80% attending four–year colleges.
There are notable challenges to detracking schools and classrooms. On a schoolwide level, reformers can face community opposition when attempting to detrack (Welner, 2001; Welner & Burris, 2006; Welner & Oakes, 2005). Schools encounter difficulties determining effective mechanisms for detracking; when left up to students to choose tracks they can make decisions based on social rather than academic reasons (Yonezawa, et al, 2002) and the complexity of students' schedules can create imbalanced classes even when detracking is the goal. Within detracked classrooms themselves, teachers and students face numerous challenges, including devising a curriculum and pedagogical practices that are effective with students coming from varying levels of preparation, as students who have been tracked low for their previous school career have been “deskilled” by the experience, training teachers who are used to a different conceptions of knowledge and learner ability, and creating harmony among students who may not know each other well. Many of these challenges were encountered (and resolved differently) in the three study schools, as will be described in the findings section.

Democratic Education

One of the primary aims of public schooling in the United States has been to prepare young people for life in a democracy. This analysis takes a Deweyan perspective on what such preparation entails. Parker (1996) describes Dewey’s associationist view of how public schools can play a vital role in creating democratic citizens:

First, numerous and varied interests are consciously shared... many ties potentially connect members of the school community, faculty and students alike...Second, the interplay among groups—students, teachers, ethnic and racial groups, males and females... potentially is quite vigorous. Public schools are the only public spaces encountered by virtually all children, and this makes them, if not ideal sites and certainly not the only ones, nonetheless promising sites for a genuine civic apprenticeship (pp. 10-11).

Communication across all axes of difference is critical to democratic life and democratic education. As Dewey (1916/1985) argues, “An undesirable society...is one which internally and externally sets up barriers to free intercourse and communication of experience” (p. 95) This conviction is shared by many detracking advocates who argue that school tracking separates students and prepares them unequally and inequitably for life in a democracy (e.g. Oakes, 1995).

The National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS] states that “a primary goal of public education is to prepare students to be engaged and effective citizens,” defining an effective citizen as “one who has
the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to assume the ‘office of citizen’ in our democratic republic” (NCSS, 2006). Beyond the “communication of experience” advocated by Dewey, certain knowledge, skills, and orientations are essential for effective participation in democratic life. As Patrick writes,

…a central facet of civic education should be the joint development of cognitive and participatory skills. Cognitive skills empower citizens to identify, describe, explain, and evaluate information and ideas pertinent to public issues and problems and to make and defend decisions about them. Participatory skills empower citizens to influence public policy decisions and to hold accountable their representatives in government...The development of cognitive and participatory skills requires active learning by students... (2000, pp. 3-4).

Critical thinking skills, engagement with the world, ability to work with diverse peers and to discuss issues all are part of preparation for democratic life. These ideas are at the root of the democratized orientation toward knowledge and learning that this study identifies at two of the three case study schools.

As NCSS’s stated commitment to preparing citizens indicates, social studies classrooms are the home base for teaching democratic skills and orientations in U.S. schools. The development of these capacities is considered to be central to the purpose of social studies education by many social studies scholars (e.g. Hahn, 2001; Parker, 2001a). A number of studies analyze the impact of programs, approaches or interventions designed to directly integrate civic and democratic education into the social studies curriculum (e.g. Atherton, 2000; Chaffee, 2000; Hepburn, 2000; Wade, 2001; Westheimer & Kahne, in press); others center their analysis on the content of the curriculum itself (e.g. Newmann, Bertocci & Landsness, [1977], 1996) while still others focus on particular classroom methods used to foster democratic skills and dispositions (e.g. Parker, 2001b; Peng, 2000). A number of large-scale, quantitative studies measure the extent of civic learning in classrooms in the United States and beyond, including the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Civic Education Study (CIVED) which employed a situated approach to structure it’s survey of civics and citizenship education in 28 democratic countries (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schultz, 2001; Torney-Purt, Schwille, & Amadeo, 1999). A thorough review of this work is not possible within the confines of this article; it is a rich body of research with important implications for the practice of democratic education in social studies classrooms.

Few studies, however, consider the potential relationship between school grouping practices, democratic education, and the social studies.
The research described in this article does just that by examining the impact of a change in grouping practices on teaching and learning in social studies classrooms, utilizing a situated perspective to analyze how learning was constituted in various detracked settings.

A Situated Perspective on Learning

Research on detracking suffers from a lack of attention to how learning is constituted in detracked settings, particularly in detracked social studies classrooms. A number of empirical studies attend to the interaction between subject matter and heterogeneity of the setting, principally in mathematics and English classrooms (Boaler, 2000, 2006; Cone, 1992; Freedman, Delp & Crawford, 2005; Horn, 2006a, 2006b). The little research that exists on the particularities of detracking in social studies suggests a consistency between some of the goals and best practices of social studies education and the goals and best practices for detracking. From his survey of students in detracked ninth grade social studies and English classes at a diverse urban high school, Cooper (1996) suggests that students were engaged and enjoyed learning in these detracked classes. Rothenberg, McDermott and Martin (1998) found that students in heterogeneous classes had more exposure to student-centered instruction and higher order questions and scored higher on measures of critical thinking than their peers in homogeneous settings. Weintraub (1997) describes the growth she felt her students achieved in her detracked 10th grade social studies class. None of the existing research, however, is attentive to the interaction between detracking reform and social studies content and pedagogy across several school settings; nor does it closely examine how social studies learning was constituted in such settings.

This study aims to supply a much needed systematic examination of detracking in high school social studies classrooms. It explores the implications for social studies learning of the structural reorganization that detracking entails and the practices fostered by this reconfiguration. To do so it employs a situated perspective on learning (Greeno & MMAP, 1998; Lave, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991). This view of learning is undergirded by sociocultural theory which posits that learning and development are embedded in social settings and interactions (Vygotsky, L., 1986; Wertsch, J.V., 1998). This approach is distinct from the cognitive theories of learning that underlay many common approaches to teaching and which focus on the thought processes of individuals. In contrast, a situated perspective holds that the activity systems within which students learn shape their learning profoundly; indeed, they shape learner identity itself. In this view, classroom practices are more than vehicles for learning, they are “participatory activities that are fundamental to what students learn” (Boaler, 2000, p. 391), and learning is a process of identity construction (Lave & Wenger, 1991).
A few examples from this study will illustrate this notion. A cooperative learning activity on the Renaissance or a classroom discussion of the reasons for and ramifications of poverty both teach students more than the content about European history or the economic and social phenomenon of poverty. Students learn what it means to be a learner of social studies through these activities and construct a sense of what knowledge in that field is; in this example, that knowledge is constructed as variable (a topic can be approached in many ways) and derived through activity and social interaction. Conversely, a worksheet on the Renaissance or a lecture on poverty also teach more than the content at hand; over time, if such practices predominate, students may also conclude that social studies means sitting quietly, memorizing and supplying facts, and recording knowledge distributed by others. Such activities promote the notion that knowledge is fixed (that there is only one way to address a topic) and learned through a simple transfer process from teacher to student. Students’ identities as social studies learners, and as citizens in a democracy, may take shape amid these practices.

Horn (2006a) and Boaler (2000) apply a situated perspective to the learning of mathematics in heterogeneous settings. Both argue that heterogeneity was linked to students’ development of positive “mathematical identities” in the classrooms they investigated. In their study of both tracked and detracked mathematics classrooms, these researchers found that homogeneous settings employed more didactic, procedural, memorization oriented, and individualistic approaches to mathematics and a view of mathematical knowledge as a fixed set of facts and processes transmitted to learners. This was an orientation towards mathematics, they found, that alienated students from mathematics learning and interrupted the development of positive mathematical identities. The more collaborative, inquiry-based and concept-driven approach of the heterogeneous settings enfranchised more students as mathematical learners.

In this article, I argue that detracked social studies classrooms have this same potential; the reform can be part of a classroom approach that not only teaches democratic skills and dispositions directly, but embodies them, constituting learning and knowledge in ways that are conducive to democratic life. In two of the three classrooms studied in this project, the practices used constituted learning in a democratized manner, fostering the ability to exchange ideas, think critically, and engage with the world that is essential to democratic life. In the third, an adherence to rote, didactic practices mitigated the potential benefits of detracking. The combination of detracking and social studies, at its best, can result in a rich “laboratory of democracy” within which students can develop as citizens, but detracking alone does not guarantee this result. This cross-case comparison study provides an opportunity to explore both possible outcomes.
Methods

Methodological Orientation

The research study on which this article is based was grounded in an interpretive perspective that highlights the socially constructed and locally negotiated nature of experience (Mehan, 1992). Learning was theorized as “a social phenomenon, constituted in the experienced, lived-in world” (Lave, 1993, p. 64), and thus the research design focused on collecting data on daily classroom life over a substantial period of time and through the eyes of varied participants. The study also drew upon a critical research paradigm to attend to the ways in which larger structures of inequality framed the possibilities of individuals and groups with the least power (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999), providing a framework from which to analyze the daily experiences of both students and teachers while attending to broader school and societal patterns of racial and socioeconomic inequality. These dimensions are treated more fully in other articles from the study (see Rubin, in press-a; Rubin, in press-b).

Interpretive research studies are not designed to make claims about what takes place in all or even in many detracked classrooms; such research is not meant to lead to generalizations about what happens in other settings. Rather interpretive research can provide nuanced analyses of what took place in the sites studied, resulting in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) about the processes, discourses, patterns and dynamics at work in a particular place or places. This study presents a theorized description of the learning processes at play in three detracked settings, utilizing a cross-case comparison to explore potential variations. In doing so, it provides insight into how detracking can provide a fruitful context for democratized learning and what can impede the reform from functioning in this way.

Data Collection and Participants

Data were collected at three large, comprehensive public high schools with detracking in place in at least one course. Schools were selected that had detracked their ninth grade social studies courses and that represented a variety of demographic patterns. The schools were: 1) Oakcity High School, a school in a low-income urban area serving low-income African American and Latino students; 2) Walnutville High School, a school in a predominantly middle to upper middle-income suburban area, serving an overwhelmingly White student body; 3) Elmtown High School, a school in a socioeconomically mixed suburban area, serving a racially and socioeconomically diverse student body. Table 1 in the appendix describes each of the study schools in further detail.

One detracked ninth grade social studies classroom was examined in each site, selected to reflect the range of learning, racial and
socioeconomic diversity of the school. At each site the author and her assistants observed over twenty sessions of the focal social studies class, recording detailed field notes during each session. Five or six students, also selected to reflect the range of learning, racial and socioeconomic diversity of the school, were key informants, interviewed at the beginning and end of the school year and “shadowed” through an entire school day. Table 2 in the appendix describes each of the focal classrooms in more detail. The author interviewed department chairs, social studies teachers, guidance counselors, and in-class support teachers as well, resulting in a data set of over 1000 pages of interview transcripts, observation notes, and school, district, and state generated materials.

Data Analysis

As described earlier, this analysis employs a situated perspective on learning that proposes that learning takes place through activity. For this reason, data analysis in this project focused on understanding how learning and knowledge were constituted through discourses and practices of the detracked classrooms under study. As in most interpretive research, data analysis for this project was ongoing and iterative.

Utilizing a grounded theory approach, the researcher wrote reflective memos throughout the data collection process, noting key issues that emerged during all stages of data collection (e.g. the nature and role of culturally relevant practices). The researcher identified repeated practices in each setting, recurring discursive phenomena, and common or typical interactions. Categories were generated that applied across the three case studies (e.g. “practices,” “content”); each school had both unique and shared codes within the larger categories (e.g. “Renaissance,” found only in one case, vs. “multiple intelligences,” found in multiple cases). Relationships among codes and categories led to the development of theoretical assertions which were described in memos and themselves compared to the data, revised, and used to refine the codes and categories being used. These assertions, linked to relevant evidence from multiple sources, became the heart of the findings, which are organized into the three sub-sections described below. Each finding is illustrated with selections from the data; every example chosen exemplifies a general trend or category in the data.

Findings

As the first findings section describes, two of the three settings were much closer to the ideal of detracked classrooms as “laboratories of democracy” than the third. At these two schools, diverse Elmtown High School and more homogeneous Walnutville High School, knowl-
edge was constituted in a way that provided a democratized learning experience for students. The detracked social studies classroom in the third school had a different orientation toward knowledge, providing a living example of the ineffectiveness of detracking by itself to spur deep changes in teaching and learning. The second findings section describes challenges to effective detracking encountered at all three schools, and the third outlines the structures and practices related to detracking that facilitated the democratized construction of knowledge and learning at two of the schools.

**Part One: Democratized Constructions of Knowledge and Learning**

The first part of the findings describes how the practices of two of the three detracked social studies classrooms studied embodied a democratized approach to social studies learning that was conducive to the development of democratic skills and orientations. There were four common aspects to learning and knowledge in these classrooms. Knowledge and learning were constituted as: 1) variable rather than fixed and constructed through activity; 2) socially constructed through collaboration and exchange of ideas; 3) relevant to students, connecting them to the surrounding world; 4) attainable by all students, regardless of their differing levels of previous achievement, even if some need more time or support to succeed. In these two schools, the challenges of detracking spurred teachers to develop learning environments with these characteristics. For the third school, teaching practices were unresponsive to detracking, and learning and knowledge were not constructed in ways that promoted the development of democratic skills and orientations.

**Knowledge is variable and constructed through activity.** In the detracked social studies classrooms examined in Elmtown and Walnutville high schools, teaching practices embodied the notions that there were many ways to go about teaching social studies content and that learners developed understanding through active engagement with course material. This developed students’ critical thinking capacities and allowed learners with varied interests and talents to access the curriculum, aspects of a democratized approach to social studies learning. In both schools, adults attributed this approach to the heterogeneity of the setting.

In Mr. Carey’s class at racially and socioeconomically diverse Elmtown High School there were many ways to learn social studies. Students discussed issues, drew maps, analyzed slides, saw film clips, created group skits and presentations, conducted research, as well as taking part in more conventional activities, such as listening to lectures and taking tests and quizzes. Mr. Carey, a White man in his mid-30’s, noted that he employed more active methods and a higher level curriculum in his ninth grade World History class since the class had been detracked.
Mr. Mancini, the in-class support teacher for special education students in Mr. Carey’s class, expressed the notion that knowledge was variable rather than fixed and constructed through activity, saying,

…you can’t expect to teach everyone the same way…in a heterogeneous group you can’t say you know this is this… you can’t just be like black and white all the time. You have to really differentiate your instruction…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.

The heterogeneity of the group impelled these teachers to construct a more varied, active curriculum that enfranchised more students as learners and participants in the classroom.

One example of an activity that drew many students into active construction of knowledge at Elmtown was Mr. Carey’s frequent interactive slide lectures. During these lectures, Mr. Carey used slides, often self-produced, to engage students in discussion around particular concepts. In the following excerpt he showed the class slides from a trip to Ghana, drawing them into a consideration of culture, the focus of the course at that time. This episode features Michelle, Latifah and Jasmine, three African American students. As he began the lesson, Mr. Carey turned the slide projector to an image of women gathered at a well, with several small straw huts in the background. After some preliminary discussion of the image, he asks the class some questions.

Mr. Carey: What sort of ethnocentric statement could be made about this picture?
Latifah: That the way they’re living, in those dirt huts, we’re used to living in brick houses.
Jasmine: They’re getting water, right? Americans could be like “that’s a stupid way of doing it; you could just use bottled water.”
Mr. Carey: Or use a tap.
Michelle: An ethnocentric person would probably say those women should be working, not going to get water.

Rather than asking students to memorize a textbook definition of ethnocentrism, in this example, Mr. Carey took a visual approach to exploring the concept, allowing students to construct their own definition through discussion. Students built meaning by relating the concept under study to their own experiences and listening to each others’ ideas. In Mr. Carey’s classroom, slide shows, videos, readings from outside the textbook, along with frequent references to local issues and concerns
allowed students to actively construct meaning in a variety of manners, providing access to the curriculum to a wide variety of students and building students’ thinking skills.

At more racially homogeneous and socioeconomically affluent Walnutville High School, the students in Ms. Stefano’s detracked ninth grade Global Perspectives class wrote travel diaries from the age of exploration, created group presentations of different aspects of the Renaissance and drew large maps embedded with facts about each country represented, among other activities. Ms. Stefano, a White woman in her mid-30’s, demonstrated the view that knowledge could be constructed in a variety of ways, as she explained her approach:

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, 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 being given.

This approach created opportunities for students with a wide range of skills and interests to connect with the curriculum. She explained:

I mean, not every kid’s going to enjoy class every day. But I think if you varied the opportunity with which they learn...and the product they have to produce, I think that’s important too. If it’s homework every night and an essay on Friday every week, you’re alienating a lot of what they can do. But if it’s a political cartoon and then an essay and then, you know, a reading with a homework assignment or just a journal entry...I’ll have kids who don’t hand in any homework or the written stuff and then I give them a journal assignment and I get a five-page creative response...I like to vary it up.

As at Elmtown, detracking at Walnutville inspired a varied and active approach to lesson planning; Ms. Stefano created an array of activities with the explicit aim of engaging a group of students she understood to be diverse in skills and interests. As Sarah, a White girl who was classified as a special education student, noted:

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. She, like, 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...we all get to express our opinions on what we feel about it.
The way learning was constituted in the detracked classrooms of these two schools afforded a wide range of students the opportunity to express their ideas and develop the thinking and communication skills that are important for democratic life.

The impact of this construction of learning is clarified through the contrast with third study school, where knowledge was constituted quite differently. At Oakcity High Mr. Bartlett, the social studies teacher, adhered to the daily regimen of worksheets, quizzes and tests that was consistent throughout the school curriculum, despite the detracked nature of the social studies class. As Monique described, “when we’re in class 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.” Ana concurred with this description of their classroom activities. To do well in the class all students could do was “study, read, read, and read. Study.” Mr. Barlett’s principal goal for his students was that they “learn a format.” Such practices embodied a fixed view of knowledge in which students were the recipients of textbook and teacher knowledge and engaged activity was unnecessary. Such a conception of knowledge did not promote students’ acquisition of the collaborative, critical, and expressive skills necessary that facilitate engagement in democratic life.

Learning is a social activity; knowledge is constructed through collaboration and exchange of ideas; students hold valuable knowledge. In two of the detracked settings, students interacted continually through discussion, group work and peer teaching. These student-centered practices gave students a chance to learn from and about one another, contributing to the detracked setting’s ability to foster the “free intercourse and communication of experience” promoted by Dewey as critical to democratic education. In these settings, students learned with rather than alongside peers, listened to opposing views, and had opportunities to express themselves to others, all important for democratized learning. The teachers in these schools connected this approach to the detracked nature of the class.

At diverse Elmtown High School, one of the things Mr. Carey liked best about his detracked class was his students’ “general interactions with different types of kids.” At Elmtown, detracking meant that these interactions would take place in a racially diverse setting. As Mr. Mancini, the in-class support teacher noted, “if they did do tracking, unfortunately, you know, you’d have very um, overwhelmingly either um, white classes in this school or African American classes… the class would be a lot less diversified.” Students were more integrated across levels of previous achievement as well. Elmtown student Michelle noted that students “tend to hang with people that are in their classes, or get to know more people in those classes.” For this reason, she preferred the detracked setting, saying “I like the way it is because it integrates [lower and higher achieving students]…which is ultimately better for the person or the people in the class.”
Mr. Carey took a different approach to leading discussions in the detracked setting than he had in his lower tracked classes in previous years. In this the second year of detracking in ninth grade social studies at Elmtown, he found that he allowed students freer reign in discussion than he had done before detracking. In his lower track ninth grade classes his tendency had been to “focus the class, dictate where the conversations go,” and to “be much more of a leader of the discussion.” He facilitated more open exchanges in the detracked class, aiming to encourage “the whole idea of like, ‘listen to me, here’s my side of it.’ ‘Here’s a story, I’ll apply what we’re just talking about.’” Sharing of ideas often led to insight and shared perspectives across difference, as in a class discussion about poverty, in which students pooled their knowledge to develop a collective understanding of the concept and its economic and social consequences, or the earlier slide show excerpt in which Mr. Carey used slides of women at a well in Africa to connect his students both with a distant culture (Ghana) and an abstract concept (ethnocentrism) in a way that stimulated their interest and engagement. Yvonne noted the emphasis on expression. In the class, she reflected, “…you have to speak, because if you don’t speak, it’s like you’re bored. And the thing he says is, if you’re bored, then just put your head down, be bored by yourself. Because everybody else is going to speak.”

At Walnutville, the social studies department chair saw a direct connection between the detracked setting and student-centered strategies that fostered interaction. She told me, “I encourage them [the teachers] to not have a teacher dominated classroom…by student-centered strategies I am looking at simulation, debates, cooperative groups, research activities.” Interaction across difference was an end unto itself and deeply tied to detracking. She reflected:  

For me, the biggest positive aspect [of detracking] 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 about “I only interact with people like me.” I learn to interact with everyone. And I think that’s a big benefit for students.

In this way, learning was understood to be constructed through social interaction, preferably with a variety of students.

At Walnutville, students worked together on various group projects and helped one another with their writing. During a unit on the Renaissance, Ms. Stefano had student groups create presentations for each other on various aspects of the time period. The student group assigned to the topic of math and science in the Renaissance began with an overview, with one presenter defining a variety of terms (e.g. theology, geocentric, heliocentric, law of pendulum). The next presenter discussed important scientists and mathematicians
from the period (e.g. Galileo, Keppler, DaVinci, Brunelleschi). The third presenter showed a PowerPoint presentation to elaborate on some of these. The remaining students in the group led the class in hands-on activities to illustrate Renaissance discoveries, including an activity in which students measured and compared their arm spans with their heights and one in which they created and shared their own inventions. This type of practice positioned students as experts in the classroom, holders of knowledge. Knowledge and learning in such activities was built through interaction. As Richard described, “There’s a lot of different opinions…There’s a lot of different perspectives that you can listen to, a lot of different political views. So it makes for an interesting class.”

Again, the contrast with Oakcity High puts the democratized nature of learning at the other two schools into stark relief. At Oakcity, students rarely worked together on academic projects; knowledge constituted as held solely by the teacher. Despite the 80 minute block periods, Mr. Bartlett felt that there was not enough time for group work. He believed that learning was an individual process, as this description of his response to two students wishing to work together demonstrates:

I called her out in the hall and I said “you will no longer help him.” And I told her if necessary, I will move [her]. You like sitting next to him? Fine. When it’s a social thing, I could care less. But when it’s an academic thing, I don’t want her helping him. Why should her brainpower be given freely to him?

In this class, discussion was not valued; student initiated discussion of content related topics was repeatedly curtailed in the interests of time and classroom control. Oakcity students missed out on the collaboration and discussion found in the other two sites, and the democratic skills developed through such practices.

Knowledge should have meaning for students’ lives; it can be a bridge between students and the world. In two of the detracked classrooms, knowledge was constituted as meaningful and relevant to students’ lives; students’ experiences, interests, and opinions were intrinsic to the process of learning, and engagement with the world was part of the learning process. Teachers attributed this orientation toward learning to the diversity of the detracked setting. At Elmtown High School, the heterogeneous nature of the class both stimulated and nourished a personally meaningful approach to learning in several ways. Students in Mr. Carey’s classroom at Elmtown were excited about curricular topics that were of current importance, such as a research project in which they each were to take a stance on Latin American immigration, or a unit on the Middle East that dealt with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. “They need to know what’s hap-
pening in the world,” stated Mr. Getty, the social studies department chair, who was adamant that course content revolve around current and relevant issues, feeling that such a curriculum was essential for engaging the diverse set of students in the detracked ninth grade social studies classrooms.

Students readily engaged in discussion of topics that were current in nature, building discussion and critical thinking skills, as well as cultivating the habit of interest in the larger world around them. Class discussions were lively and structured so they were not dominated by a few talkative students. In one activity, students shared newspaper articles about the barrier wall Israel is building in the West Bank, listening avidly to one another and querying each other about the details. Some students made personal connections between regions under study and themselves, such as African American student Jasmine’s excitement about a unit on Africa, exclaiming “Yippee, Africa!” when Mr. Carey introduced the unit. She described with a sense of investment and some degree of pride how the unit dispelled troubling stereotypes:

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…It’s not true, though. In Africa they have big cities, they are very advanced, there are smart people there…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.

Social class and race were favorite topics, seen as relevant. Yvonne noted, “...right now, were’ talking about social class, and how does it relate to life.” Tarik thought this topic was “pretty cool...we can look at our own perceptions...and know what other people’s assumptions [are].”

Students were drawn in by topics of local concern as well. Mr. Carey felt this was connected to detracking. In his detracked classes he brought in an approach that he had previously used in lower tracked classes, engaging kids in “…a less academic conversation. But applicable to the topic on a personal level.” In an interactive slide lecture, Mr. Carey brought local history into the class’ study of culture by having the students discuss slides of students at Elmtown High School taken during the early part of the 20th century. Students discussed the racial implications embedded in the slides, connecting current local issues to the town’s long history of racial diversity and struggles with integration, developing critical thinking skills and a locally engaged orientation.

Walnutville had a somewhat more traditional curriculum in terms of content, focusing on ancient and European history, but discussion of current events was imbedded in the curriculum and Ms. Stefano structured her activities so that the entire class, rather than an out-
spoken few, participated. In an activity in which students wrote back and forth to one another about a topic in the news, lively discussion and debate filled everyone’s handwritten pages. Ms. Stefano read one interchange aloud:

The first person said, ‘I don’t think 9-11 could have been prevented. They hate Americans. I think Bush has handled it well.’

The second person wrote, ‘I am in between on the war mainly because I don’t know enough about each side of the situation.’

The third person addresses what the first person said. ‘Who are they? Perhaps they have a reason to hate us. The cabinet makes the decisions and Bush just follows them.’

Richard described his class as “Democrats, Republicans, independents...Then you have like people from different backgrounds, like with different ethnicities...you have all different people, so it’s a big conglomerate.” The detracked setting, with its potential for diversity of opinion and experience was a fertile ground for connecting students to issues of current importance, fostering engagement with national and world issues, all essential for an educated democratic citizenry.

Again, in contrast to the other two study schools, detracking at Oakcity did not spur a construction of learning as linked to engagement with the world. As Monique described the curriculum, “We just talk about like 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.” Carlos concurred, explaining “I guess we learn...like natural resources like how land is structured.” This geographical study went on for the duration of the course, and appeared to be uninteresting, even pointless to students. Carlos described it as “mostly a review of what I did in eighth grade,” and Monique complained that “they ain’t teaching us nothing new for me to understand anything.” Students’ attempts to discuss issues of interest were discouraged by the teacher, who felt he needed to keep the class on track and moving quickly, even when links to the content were clear. While detracking at two of the schools fostered students’ senses that they were connected to the larger world, students at the third school did not experience this aspect of democratized learning.

All students can learn, even if the amount of time and support needed varies. In two of the study schools, detracking was connected to a construction of knowledge and learning as attainable by all students. In these schools, detracking provided opportunities for students who otherwise would have been relegated to a lower level class for social studies to engage with a high quality, college preparatory curriculum. In the detracked classes at Walnutville and Elmtown High Schools,
students with special education designations and others who would also have been assigned to lower track classes, wrote research papers, read challenging readings, and participated in rigorous projects that would not normally be offered in lower track classes. In both settings, effective support was provided to students who had difficulty with class assignments. In these classrooms, access to knowledge was seen as the right of every student, and learning was seen as attainable by all, given appropriate time and support.

Teachers and students both reflected a belief that all students could learn at high levels. At Elmtown, this was clearly tied to detracking. Mr. Carey noted, “Now that it’s more heterogeneous...actually I teach it more like an honors class.” Yvonne, an African American student in his class who had a special education classification, appreciated the benefits of detracking. She reflected, “It’s good. You should mix them in the same classes so you can learn, those people with low achievement can learn how to be a high achieving student from watching a high achieving student [and]... the high achieving group can see what it’s like for a low achieving student.” Despite the high level of the class, Yvonne felt successful. She explained that “The way he teaches, it’s like he makes sure you understand it. He breaks it down.”

The expert assistance of in-class support teachers was central to the success of classified students. Mr. Carey said that the resource teacher helped him to “hone in” where particular students were having difficulties, providing both in and out of class support. In one class session, for example, the boy sitting next to me showed the resource teacher his paper, asking “Is this right?” The resource teacher told him that he was “missing an ocean,” brought him an atlas, and told him “You can still do more,” encouraging him to keep working, even as other students were beginning to put their books and notebooks away at the end of class. That some students needed more time and support was an accepted part of learning in the classroom, not a reason for track reassignment.

At Walnutville, special education support, along with the differentiated curriculum, provided access for students with a wide range of skills and achievement levels and was intrinsic to how Ms. Stefano planned instruction in the classroom. Ms. Stefano read the students’ mandated Individualized Educational Plans [IEPs] carefully, and attuned her instruction accordingly. She explained:

...Some of them get nothing [no accommodations]. They’ll just have an in-class support person who will give them verbal cues and stuff. Some of them get extended deadlines, some of them get extended time on tests...Some of them get note taking [assistance]. Or like I’m not allowed to grade their spelling, I’m not allowed to grade their grammar.
Students had the assistance of the regular teacher, the in-class support teacher and the case study manager. “There’s a lot of people involved to make sure they succeed,” Ms. Stefano remarked, reflecting a sense that this was an appropriate approach to learning. Students benefited from inclusion in detracked classes at Walnutville, where they had access to a rich curriculum. Inclusion student Sarah noted approvingly that in Ms. Stefano’s class the students had “discussions, or we do a project and then do discussions or do a presentation,” developing skills, critical for democratic life, that are not generally focused on in low track classrooms.

In contrast to Elmtown and Walnutville, at Oakcity High School some students were seen as simply not able to be successful. The curriculum and pedagogy of the classroom did not need to be adjusted to help them; if they did not succeed it was accepted as due to an individual limitation. Jose noted that “… basically people don’t understand Mr. Bartlett when he’s talking about the chapter and like they fail on quizzes.” Mr. Bartlett felt his students were very limited. 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.” In this setting, knowledge was not necessarily attainable by all; students did or did not “get it,” but teaching did not vary in response to student need. In the detracked social studies classrooms of Elmtown and Walnutville, to students from a range of preparation and previous achievement levels had access to higher level curriculum, opening up opportunities for more students to develop the writing, reading, and thinking skills necessary for engaged democratic citizenship. Detracking did not guarantee such opportunities, however; without a shift in how knowledge was constituted, these benefits were not realized at Oakcity.

Part Two: Challenges Faced in the Detracked Social Studies Setting

Part two of the findings describes several challenges faced in the detracked social studies classrooms studied: 1) the potential for misunderstanding that exists when teachers and students engage with issues of race, class, and culture; 2) students’ difficulties with more complex reading and writing tasks, and; 3) the difficult balance that social studies teachers must strike between studying topics deeply while covering an adequate amount of content. While detracking certainly presents other challenges, many of which have been documented elsewhere, this section focuses on those that are particularly relevant to social studies classrooms.

Engaging sensitively with issues of race, class and culture. Because of their subject matter, social studies classes tend to touch more directly on issues of race, class and culture than other subject areas. In
the generally more racially, culturally and socioeconomically diverse settings provided by detracking, such issues need to be approached thoughtfully, so as not to alienate or create conflict or discomfort among students.

As noted earlier, cultural connections could be meaningful to students, as in Jasmine’s delight with how Mr. Carey’s unit on Africa dispelled troubling stereotypes. As I argue elsewhere, constructing knowledge as personally relevant is an asset to the development of an engaged civic identity (Rubin, 2007). But without sensitivity, direct exploration of students’ racial or ethnic backgrounds could be embarrassing, as in the following episode at Oakcity. In this episode a Latina student, Edelmira, when she expressed a desire to study Mexico for her country report was interrogated by Mr. Bartlett, the social studies teacher, about her heritage:

Mr. Bartlett: (to Edelmira) I guarantee it if you could trace your blood you’d find Indo-European, Asian. Plus mestizo, no? (said with lilt) Where are you from?
Edelmira: (embarrassed, in a whisper) Mexico.
Mr. Bartlett: (loudly) Mestizo. Mix of European and Native American. Por que no trabaja en mi clase? [Why don’t you work in my class?]

Proclaiming her ethnicity, then segueing into a question about her poor classroom performance, in Spanish, when Edelmira clearly could understand English, created an uncomfortable situation for this student who was already marginalized in the class as a tenth grader who had failed in the previous year. In another instance, Mr. Bartlett missed an opportunity to make a connection between the curriculum and student identity, dismissing a student’s provocative critique of an educational video on the Caribbean (“Why they got to say ‘European luxury?’ Why not ‘Black luxury?’”) and insisting “this is one of the better films you’ll see.” By constructing race and ethnicity as points of curiosity rather than openings for curricular connection and critical thought, Mr. Bartlett undermined the democratizing potential of his diverse heterogeneous classroom.

A largely racially and ethnically homogeneous setting presented its own problems regarding this issue. Ms. Stefano explained her dilemma discussing issues of culture and stereotypes:

It’s hard. I don’t have a lot of minorities. And like I said, it’s difficult sometimes because when you only have one or two representations of the culture…I don’t want to single them out, and I don’t want to seem like I’m defending them too much. It’s hard to balance it.
This discomfort at times manifested itself in a reluctance to intervene in student interactions that involved issues of race and class, such as when a White boy commented “Greg is ghetto,” about one of the two Latino students in the class. More generally, the lack of racial and ethnic diversity at Walnutville High School made detracking a less rich reform than at Elmtown, where student diversity inspired Mr. Carey to teach deeply about issues of difference and power, and students who might not have been in the same classroom in a tracked situation (detracking had been implemented at Elmtown to counter the secondary segregation caused by tracking at the school) had the opportunity to exchange ideas, learn from each other, and build mutual respect, part of Dewey’s “associationist” vision of democracy.

Helping poorly prepared students succeed at activities involving complex reading and writing tasks. As described earlier, detracked social studies classrooms, at their best, provide access to a higher level, richer, more engaging curriculum for students with a range of preparation and skill levels. In social studies classes, such a curriculum often involved more complex reading and writing tasks than many students would encounter in their lower tracked classes, including essay writing, note taking, readings that were not from the textbook, research papers, and creative writing assignments. Students who were previously tracked low are often “deskilled” from their years of exposure to lower level curricula and rote approaches, and need extra time and support to catch up. At Walnutville High, this challenge was felt acutely. Ms. Stefano told me:

I have a reputation now…because I expect so much writing. And for them [students who are behind in their skills] writing is usually where their weakness is. So those kids, the amount of reading and writing that I give them, they really struggle…You can’t just get a kid who’s two years behind in skills, knowledge, and paying attention to suddenly be with everybody else.

Walnutville’s high expectations for students’ academic achievement, coupled with the expectation that teachers would meet the needs of each student in their class led to some frustration on Ms. Stefano’s part, however. Differentiation was expected to solve the conflict, but this was an imperfect solution.

I feel like it’s a conflicting environment. I mean…academic achievement is huge, teachers are expected to be knowledgeable and academically challenging. And then the differentiation, to me…seems like “do all that, and make sure you get to every kid in your class.” And it just seems to me like I’m being asked to do a lot and it seems hard.
Mr. Carey at Elmtown High noted a similar difficulty, reflecting that “even when I check their homework, some give like six pages of notes, this kid will have half a page.” At Oakcity this simply was not an issue, since students were not given complex reading and writing tasks.

*Balancing depth vs. breadth.* A common social studies dilemma is balancing depth of study against breadth of coverage. Social studies courses are charged with covering large swaths of material. World History has a particularly sweeping purview: the history of the entire world, across all time. Detracked social studies classes, when effective, employ instructional strategies that entail spending longer amounts of time on fewer topics, including group work, hands-on activities and projects, presentations and research projects. This can exacerbate the breadth vs. depth dilemma.

Mr. Carey listed the activities from the Africa unit, which took over six weeks of the spring semester: geography, an activity on perceptions of Africa, physical maps of Africa, the trade triangle and the impact of the slave trade, colonialism (“heavy on this”), a group project in which students created the front pages of the newspaper the day after an assigned African country became independent, the politics and governments of various African nations, the economics of Africa (including the Human Development Index), African social life, African women including female genital mutilation and the shariah laws (“that shook them up”) and an investigation of the purpose of NGO’s in Africa. After all this, Mr. Carey noted how he was caught up short at the end of the unit, realizing, “Whoa, it’s April!” and there was still much left to cover.

This admirably deep treatment of a single topic forced the teacher to spend shorter amounts of time on subsequent units. In addition when extended amounts of time are spent on one topic some students can feel bored. As Ryan, at Elmtown, complained “He spent so long on Africa, and I don’t think it was necessary.” Ms. Stefano at Walnutville High moved more quickly, but found that at times she was not able to go as in depth as she wanted. On the other hand, large amounts of time could be spent without the sort of deep treatment found in Mr. Carey’s unit on Africa, as at Oakcity High where Mr. Bartlett spent weeks on physical geography and resources. These challenges at the three schools were met, to varied extents, by the structures and practices described in the third findings section below.

**Part Three: Structures and Practices that Support Democratized Constructions of Learning in Detracked Social Studies Classrooms**

Part three of the findings explores school structures and practices that fostered the democratized construction of knowledge and learning in two of the detracked social studies classrooms under study. Knowledge and learning were constituted quite differently in the third school, where such supports were notably lacking. Effective practices
for detracked settings have been explored elsewhere in more general terms (Rubin, 2006; Rubin & Noguera, 2004). This section focuses on practices that are specific to supporting detracking as a democratizing force for social studies classrooms: 1) a clear rationale for, commitment to and guidance on detracking from the school’s social studies department; 2) training for teachers and support for students that is applicable to social studies teaching and learning; and, 3) departmental consideration of the social studies curricular issues embedded in detracking.

School and departmental commitment to detracking in social studies. Clear departmental commitment to detracking as a democratizing move appears to support the construction of learning and knowledge in the ways discussed above. At Elmtown and Walnutville High Schools, the department chairs’ visions for detracked social studies were clear. These goals were understood by the teachers, infusing their practice, helping them to overcome frustration and challenges by providing a clear message about the intent of the reform.

Mr. Getty, the social studies department chair at Elmtown, described the purpose of detracking in social studies as “to help better mix the students...to get a better diverse classroom...definitely ethnically but academically as well.” As discussed elsewhere (Rubin, in press-b) the desire to meet the needs of a range of students infused this setting, framing classroom diversity as a positive good, making reaching all students a high priority. This was a school-wide value, reflected in a conversation with a ninth grade guidance counselor, who commented “there’s a lot of literature out there that suggests if you have these classes that are heterogeneously grouped that you’re going to get more out of the students.” The department and school concurred on the value of detracking in the setting, providing a support context for the creation of classroom practices that integrated this value.

At Walnutville High School, the social studies department was also clearly committed to detracking. As the department chair Ms. Sanders, noted earlier, “...philosophically, the feeling in the [social studies] department has always been that if we were to have democratic classrooms, it should be social studies.” Ms. Stefano understood this goal, agreeing that “philosophically...it makes sense. Why would you keep them in separate rooms?” The school’s commitment to training and supporting teachers in curriculum differentiation, as will be described below, helped to reinforce this core belief that it was appropriate and beneficial for students to learn in detracked settings.

In contrast, the goals for detracking at Oakcity High School were unclear. As described in detail elsewhere (Rubin, in press-b), detracking was seen by Oakcity adults as necessitated by the departure of more affluent students from the district. The remaining students were
described as having little to offer one another, rather than as source of learning and community. The department chair theorized that detracking made sense at Oakcity because, “there were so many kids at the same level,” not because students would benefit from learning in a heterogeneous, challenging setting. Absent clear school and departmental commitment to a positive vision of detracking, Mr. Bartlett, the focal social studies teacher, persisted with a rote, low level curriculum that constructed social studies learning as boring, repetitive, irrelevant and individualistic.

Training for teachers and support for students specific to detracked social studies. Both Elmtown and Walnutville High Schools provided professional development to help teachers address the challenges faced in detracked social studies settings. At Elmtown High School, the emphasis was on cultural diversity and sensitivity training. As Mr. Getty described, they had “workshops and trainings on cultural diversity and culturally responsive learning…and learning styles.” This was helpful, and the curriculum reflected this emphasis, but the department chair also felt that they could use more training on differentiated instruction, an area in which he felt that “as a district we need to do a better job.” While not complete or the only answer, Elmtown’s professional development helped teachers to structure learning in the detracked social studies classroom in a way that valued and built upon the diversity of the student body.

At Walnutville, professional development focused on curriculum differentiation, a school wide goal. As described earlier, Ms. Stefano used the skills she developed through these trainings to draw in students with various interests and talents, as well as to provide either more challenging or more “sheltered” assignments to students who came to the class with differing levels of preparation. She explained, “…our school’s goal is differentiation…I’ve been to conferences on my own about differentiation, so I’ve had a lot of opportunity [for professional development]….differentiation things [trainings] have helped.” As noted earlier, this approach contributed to the constitution of knowledge and learning in the detracked classroom as varied and constructed through activity.

Along with professional development, teachers at Walnutville and Elmtown were supported through an effective special education structure that provided in and out of class assistance to students with special education classifications, as well as their classmates. Both schools had well trained and experienced in-class support (ICS) teachers who helped students to succeed at difficult tasks and were available to lend a hand to any student in need. As noted earlier, knowledge and learning in these classrooms were considered to be attainable by all students, no matter that some needed more time and support, and effective ICS teachers were the concrete expression of this idea. These ICS teachers played a
training role as well, providing the regular teacher with strategies and modeling best practices for reaching struggling students. Ms. Stefano reflected that “working with somebody else is obviously a big help, to have that other person, professional in the room, whose experience is in that area so they know a lot about strategies and stuff.” Mr. Carey also praised the work of his ICS teacher, Mr. Mancini, who showed him strategies like advance organizers for notes and lectures and helped his less prepared students to keep up with the class. The assumption in this setting that knowledge and learning were attainable by all went hand-in-hand with such practices.

At Oakcity High School, by contrast, there was no training offered that was specific to teaching in detracked classrooms, and the ICS teacher was inexperienced and provided little in the way of support. The result was disgruntled teachers who were sometimes cynical about the intent of the reform (suspecting that it was done to make scheduling easier) and about its potential to succeed, and a continued adherence to traditional practices and a limited view of knowledge and learning that did little to foster democratic skills and orientations.

Revising the social studies curriculum to better fit a detracked class. At Elmtown in particular, detracking reform in the ninth grade was part of a larger effort to deepen student learning through curricular revision and other reforms. The ninth grade social studies course had recently been revised to take a more global studies approach. In line with the view of knowledge and learning as relevant to students’ lives, Mr. Getty noted, “I think the curriculum had to be spruced up a little bit to kind of deal with the kids and where they’re at.” He described the new emphasis on relevant topics and a regional approach, putting forth a particular strategy for dealing with the breadth versus depth dilemma.

First of all, you’re going to do a disservice to anything World History-wise in one year. … There’s so much stuff going on in this world that the last thing we should be doing is [for example] Sumerian writing. Not that that’s not important in history and I’d love teaching that stuff and so on and so forth. But I mean they need to know what’s happening in the world. And what we do is we look at it from a region and I think that’s coincides more with the World Lit curriculum as well, that when you look inside a region you decide what are the key elements.

This curricular reform took place against the backdrop of a larger reform effort. Mr. Getty explained that in the forthcoming year, World History and World Literature classes were going to be scheduled in pairs, and “they really are going to emphasize the interrelated projects…they’ll
[English classes] be working with the history classes, doing projects and things like that.” In addition to a creating a more engaging and relevant curriculum, this was part of an effort to develop “a more unified program…a kind of shared community,” of which detracking was an integral part.

The ninth grade social studies course at Walnutville High School, while more traditional than Elmtown’s approach, was far from a standard, textbook driven run through world history. As described earlier, the class had been designed in such a way that students constructed their knowledge of course topics through activity, in collaboration with peers, and in a variety of ways. Called “Global Perspectives” rather than “World History,” the course was designed to emphasize active, project-oriented learning, and touched upon most areas of the world. At Oakcity High School there was no discernable change in curriculum due to detracking; the course relied on daily worksheets and quizzes and rarely deviated from the textbook. The curricular and larger programmatic revisions at Elmtown, and to a lesser extent at Walnutville, supported detracking, facilitating the construction of learning and knowledge in ways conductive to the development of democratic skills and orientations, and helping to alleviate the breadth vs. depth dilemmas described in section two of the findings.

Implications

Detracking efforts often begin in social studies classrooms and are frequently implemented by teachers who have not received much in the way of specific training. Charged with making this ambitious reform a success for all of their students, teachers can become frustrated and embittered. Students and teachers repeatedly note the difficulties and complexities involved in implementing the reform (Lotan, 2006; Watanabe, 2006; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006). Yet, with appropriate training and support, detracked social studies classrooms have potential to structure knowledge in a way that supports Dewey’s goal that schools function as “laboratories of democracy”; learning environments that are rich in student interaction, engagement and connection with the world embody democracy through their “democratic habits of cooperation” and “problem solving practice” (Molnar, 2005, p. 80).

This article presented classroom-based research to outline key issues in teaching and learning social studies in detracked classrooms, using a situated perspective to analyze the learning that occurred in such settings. Using examples from detracked social studies classrooms in three distinct public high schools, it provided suggestions for how to best implement this promising reform. This research reveals how racial, ethnic, and intellectual diversity found
in many detracked social studies classrooms can strengthen teaching and learning, stimulating a richer, more engaging curriculum and bringing us closer to realizing the full educational and civic benefits of public education.

This research points to some of the ways that social studies teachers can maximize the potential of detracked classrooms, and how teachers in such settings can be best prepared and supported. This year long study of detracking in three distinct school settings revealed that detracked social studies classrooms had the potential to be sites in which knowledge was seen as variable and constructed through activity, learning was understood to be social and built through interaction, knowledge was considered to be relevant to students lives and achievable by all. This resulted in practices such as the following:

- Varied, active, creative pedagogies
- Practices that increase student interaction
- Content that engages students on topics of personal, local, national, and international relevance
- Activities that encourage the development of higher order skills in students with a range of previous academic preparation
-Attention to how to deal sensitively with issues of race, class, and culture
- Support for teachers for detracking-specific challenges, including training in differentiated instruction, culturally relevant pedagogy, and strategies to support lower achieving students
- Support structures for students both inside and outside of class
- Clear and specific commitment to a vision of detracking on the part of the social studies department and school
- Curricular and programmatic changes that facilitate best practices in detracked social studies

While such practices could simply be said to be “good teaching,” teachers in Elmtown and Walnutville drew a connection between the heterogeneity of their classrooms and their use of such practices. Research indicates that knowledge can be constructed quite differently in low tracked settings; detracking can set the stage for classroom practices which constitute learning and knowledge in more meaningful ways (Boaler, 2000). In the case of social studies learning, school organization can play a crucial role in spurring a democratized approach to learning and knowledge.

Teachers, departments, and schools can only do so much, however. If a school (and therefore the detracked social studies class) is not racially, socioeconomically, and intellectually diverse, then a de-
tracked class’s potential to function as a “laboratory for democracy” is compromised. Diverse settings have an advantage in garnering the full benefits of the untracked environment. Racial desegregation and socioeconomic integration is a fundamental piece of the reform, something which is beyond the scope of many schools’ reform efforts. At diverse Elmtown, the curriculum provided access to multicultural content for all students; Walnutville’s curriculum, while varied and active, was less multicultural, perhaps because of the greater homogeneity of the student body. Furthermore, as the case of Oakcity illustrates, in many poor urban schools a “pedagogy of poverty” (Haberman, 1991) that adheres to rote conceptions of learning and limited views of learners’ capacities, subsumes reform attempts, rendering detracking ineffective. Furthermore, the economic challenges found in poor urban settings are linked to the continued inability of such schools to create meaningful change, to transform even mandated reforms into results for students (Anyon, 2006).

Boaler writes that “the union of knowledge and activity central to situated theories provides the greatest challenge to traditional models of teaching that has ever been made” (2000, p. 381). The notion that learning is built through action and that the activities students engage in fundamentally shape the nature of knowledge in the classroom seems essentially Deweyan and highly consequential for a consideration of how to best educate students in a democracy. As Molnar (2005) describes:

For Dewey, an engaged democratic community built on rational interactions was necessary for the progressive development of humankind. Schools were, in his view, laboratories of democracy in which students learned democratic habits of cooperation and public service by living them in the classroom. Moreover, Dewey argued for a pedagogy guided by rational thought and problem-solving practice through which individuals could develop to their greatest capacity and contribute most effectively to democratic civic culture (p. 80).

School grouping practices appear linked to the creation of social studies settings in which individuals can build their capacities and desire to participate effectively in democratic life, but only if democratized conceptions of knowledge and learning frame the daily practices and discourses of these classrooms.
Appendix

Table 1. Study Schools

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Study Schools</th>
<th>Oakcity</th>
<th>Walnutville</th>
<th>Elmtown</th>
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<tr>
<td>Number of students</td>
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<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other languages</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2.8%</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></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median household income</td>
<td>$36,100</td>
<td>$98,400</td>
<td>$74,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per capita income</td>
<td>$14,300</td>
<td>$47,200</td>
<td>$44,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent in poverty</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance on statewide exam</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Arts Literacy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>51.9%</td>
<td>67.5%</td>
<td>64.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial</td>
<td>68.7%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>46.5%</td>
<td>42.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>45.3%</td>
<td>25.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-high school plans (self-reported)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year college</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
<td>83.9%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-year college</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other education</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Limited English Proficient
2. Refers to first language spoken at home in order of frequency.
3. Includes (in order of frequency): Others, Creole, Arabic, Panjabi.
4. Includes (in order of frequency): Korean, Mandarin, Cantonese, Taiwanese, Vietnamese.
5. Includes (in order of frequency): Others, Patois, French, Arabic, Bengali, Farsi.
6. Individualized Educational Program, indicating a special education classification.
Table 2: **Student Composition of Study Classes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Oakcity</th>
<th>Walnutville</th>
<th>Elmtown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total students in class</strong></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Students by race/ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab American</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Students by gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Students by classification status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with IEPs</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Author Notes
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1. Pseudonyms have been used for the names of all people and places in this article.
2. The case of Oakcity High is presented in more detail in Rubin, B. (2006b). In this findings section, aspects of the detracked social studies classroom studied at the school are described in brief, to provide a useful comparison with the other two cases; a full elaboration of this case is not possible within the confines of this article.

References


Rubin, B.C. (in press-a). Learner identities amid figured worlds: Constructing (in)competence at an urban high school. The Urban Review.


Welner, K., Burris, C., Wiley, E., & Murphy, J. (in press). Accountability, rigor, and detracking: Achievement effects of embracing a challenging curriculum as a universal good for all students. Teachers College Record.


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