Unpacking Detracking: When Progressive Pedagogy Meets Students' Social Worlds

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Despite heated debate over detracking, little research exists on how the reform plays out in the classroom. This article, based on a year-long interpretive study of a detracked ninth-grade program at a diverse urban high school, focuses on the encounter between the "official" practices of the detracked classrooms under study and the "unofficial" social worlds of the students taking part in those practices. The author describes how aspects of the overall school context framed and permeated students' interactions in their detracked classes, at times leading to a reiteration of the very inequalities that detracking was designed to address.

KEYWORDS: cooperative group work, detracking, inequity, race, and ethnicity, school reform.

So, generally, when I'm putting groups together I'm trying to balance them in a number of different ways by gender and ethnicity and socioeconomic backgrounds and personality type. . . . I think . . . having the White, upper-, and middle-class kids appreciate the life experiences of the students of color in the class and the way in which those life experiences—those different life experiences—give those kids something to contribute and are something that the White kids in the class can learn from [and are important].

—Mr. James,¹ history teacher in detracked ninth-grade core²

I would actually probably choose [to work with in a small group]—I'm going say my friends. Not just because—not just so I could talk to them or whatever. Only because in other experiences I've had . . .

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I don't exactly remember... Oh, I don't want to say their names but we sat in a group quiz and they treated me like I was ignorant and when we were reading the questions and I got it right away, they looked at me like, "Oh. How do you know that?" I'm, like, "I read the book." They didn't respect me, and my friends do, and they [my friends] know I'm intelligent.

—Kiana, a high-achieving African American–European American student in Mr. James's history class

In his detracked history class at an integrated urban high school, Mr. James hoped that by creating carefully balanced cooperative groups he could provide opportunities for his students to learn from each other and to broaden their knowledge of the world. He wished, in particular, for his more privileged, European American students to learn about the "life experiences" of their peers of color. Kiana's experiences of group work, however, reflected the lived reality of a student of color working in an intentionally "balanced" group. When placed with students who were not her friends—European American students, in the racially polarized social context of this particular school—she felt she was treated as "ignorant." Rejecting the carefully balanced groups constructed by her teachers, Kiana preferred instead to work with friends whom she felt respected her.

Teachers and administrators in many integrated schools are disturbed by the persistent educational inequities and resegregation often attributed to tracking (Cone, 1993; Noguera, 1995; Oakes, 1992). Detracking, the conscious organization of students into academically and racially heterogeneous classrooms, has been attempted in many such schools. Yet the research on detracking yields no clear answers as to the classroom-level effectiveness of the reform. Quantitative studies present contradictory findings about the impact of detracking on student achievement (e.g., Allan, 1991; Brewer, Rees, & Argys, 1995; Feldhusen, 1991; Kulik, 1991; Slavin, 1991, 1995). Qualitative studies reveal the complex and charged dynamics that come to the fore as detracking is implemented in diverse schools and communities (Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997; Wells et al., 1996; Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002), but they do not explore interactions within the detracked classrooms themselves. I noticed this gap in the literature when, as a new graduate student fresh from 6 years as a teacher in detracked classrooms, I first began to investigate these issues.

This article presents the results of a year-long ethnographic case study of a group of students and their two teachers in the detracked ninth-grade English and history classes of a diverse urban high school and provides a close analysis of detracking in the classroom. Officially, the classrooms in this study were framed by the progressive, student-centered pedagogies of Mr. Apple and Mr. James, two teachers committed to using detracking to rectify their high school's long-standing and racially defined educational
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inequalities. To achieve these ends they frequently used small group work as a way to facilitate both learning and social interaction across race and class lines. Unofficially, as hinted at by Kiana, social dynamics in these two classrooms were complex and mediated by notions of race, class, and academic competence that were forged in the larger school context. For students, small groups often proved to be sites of tension and discomfort where fractures of race and class came to the fore. This article describes how students enacted, or brought to life, the teaching practices of the detracked core program, reshaping them from the teachers' original intentions. Sometimes the result was a reiteration of the very inequalities that detracking was designed to address.

The present analysis should be of interest to stakeholders in current detracking efforts, as well as to teachers and researchers who are concerned with how equity-driven school reforms are implemented at the classroom level and how students experience progressive pedagogical practices. In the next section, I present selected literature on tracking and detracking and explicate the theoretical underpinnings of the study. In subsequent sections I describe the study's setting and the methods used. I then describe the teachers' official practices in the detracked classroom, the students' unofficial worlds, and—through the example of group work—the clash between the two. In the final section I offer several insights based on the findings and consider the implications for both theory and practice.

Background

Tracking

The practice of tracking in U.S. schools—that is, the sorting and grouping of students by perceived ability—has long been critiqued by educational researchers (e.g., Bowles, 1971; Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1963). A resurgence of research and writing on the topic followed the publication of Keeping Track by Oakes in 1985 (e.g., Mehan, 1992; Slavin, 1993; Tate, 1994; Welner & Oakes, 1996; Wheelock, 1992). These works argued that tracking segregates integrated schools and provides an inferior education for students in the lower tracks. The literature documents how lower-track students, who are mainly poor and belong to minority groups, receive an unchallenging, non-college-bound curriculum delivered by the worst teachers, while students in the higher tracks, mainly White and middle- to upper-middle class, take part in a more challenging, college-bound curriculum taught by more experienced and skilled teachers. In this way, according to these researchers, tracking is one of the means by which the race- and class-linked inequalities notable in our schools and in society at large are reproduced.

Recent studies suggest that a less rigid form of tracking, called "ability grouping," has come to the fore in U.S. schools. In ability grouping, individual students are able to enroll in a range of courses, from remedial to
advanced, with placement determined on a course-by-course basis (Lucas, 1999; Yonezawa et al., 2002). Grouping patterns associated with race and class persist, however (Lucas, 1999; Oakes et al., 1997; Wheelock, 1992), despite the appearance of greater flexibility. Thus researchers, educators, and others continue to raise concerns about tracking as a mechanism for the reproduction of inequalities in schools.

**Detracking**

Detracking is often advocated as a solution for the inequalities attributed to tracking (Goodlad & Oakes, 1988; Slavin, 1993; Wheelock, 1992). A number of schools have attempted to detrack in recent years (e.g., Cohen, 1993; Cone, 1993; Page & Pool, 1995). This effort usually involves the conscious organization of students into academically heterogeneous classrooms. Beyond this general description, however, a wide variety of reforms fall under the label of "detracking," including programs that eliminate the non-college track yet maintain an honors track, classes that are detracked with the exception of those deemed to be "gifted," programs that select "high potential/low achieving" minority students for participation in college preparatory classes, the detracking of one department or one age-grade, and schools allowing students to self-select into advanced placement classes (e.g., Cone, 1992; Cooper, 1996; Lipman, 1998; Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva, 1994). The detracking attempts described in the literature cited above indicate both the widespread and varied nature of the reform.

Much of the detracking literature is dedicated to descriptions of appropriate pedagogical approaches for the detracked classroom (e.g., Bigelow, 1992; Cohen, 1986; Cohen & Lotan, 1997; Shulman, 1998; Slavin, 1991; Wheelock, 1992, 1994). Group work, or cooperative learning (the terms are used interchangeably here), emerges repeatedly in the literature as a recommended teaching practice for detracked classrooms. Cooperative learning, considered a democratic pedagogy, is aligned with the equity-geared goals of detracking. In cooperative learning groups, advocates write, students develop a "positive interdependence" while still being held individually accountable for their performance (Wheelock, 1992, p. 200). Advocates argue that cooperative learning improves the achievement of all children and that the collaborative skills for effective group work that students learn, under the guidance of their teachers, help to break down status hierarchies in the classroom (Cohen, 1986). Several studies support the idea that a highly structured version of group work may have a positive effect on student achievement in heterogeneous settings (Cohen & Lotan, 1995; Cohen, Lotan, & Holthuis, 1995; Cohen, Lotan, & Leechor, 1989), although that relationship is not consistent (Webb, 1991).

The wide range of reforms included under the label of detracking has made it difficult to assess its impact on students. The few quantitative studies on the topic present contradictory data. In a series of debates in the pages of *Educational Leadership* (1991, 1993) and *Phi Delta Kappan* (1995–1996),
both detracking advocates and critics used test scores and other sources to support opposite stances, with no firm conclusions. Reviewing the existing studies, Slavin (1995, p. 221) concluded, "[T]he jury is still out on how such untracking programs will work in practice."

Qualitative researchers have focused on analyzing the school and community dynamics that emerge as teachers and administrators attempt to implement various detracking measures, rather than focusing on the effect of detracking on student achievement (e.g., Cooper, 1996; Oakes et al., 1997; Wells & Serna, 1996; Yonezawa et al., 2002). Providing a sense of the persistence of the deeply held cultural beliefs, ideologies, and arrangements of power that detracking seeks to confront, these studies suggest that educators trying to implement detracking are challenged by ideologies that are at the core of our educational system. Oakes et al. (1997) describe how, in desegregated school settings, elite parents often use their cultural capital to circumvent detracking reform; the authors also describe how teachers are frequently unable to resist local constructions of race and ability that support tracking. Most recently, Yonezawa et al. described both the institutional barriers and the difficult personal decisions that minority students face when detracking is implemented by means of student choice. This nuanced literature situates detracking as a complex reform at the center of several deeply held ideologies and captures the institutional and cultural terrain on which detracking reform is often played out. However, these qualitative studies are not based on observation of classrooms where detracking is implemented.

It is clear from this literature that the implementation of detracking proceeds with difficulty in diverse school contexts. It is less clear how aspects of the school context affect the enactment of detracking within the detracked classroom itself, even when teachers employ recommended pedagogies. Despite the large body of literature advocating particular teaching methods for detracking, there has been little systematic research conducted on actual detracking practices (Mehan, 1996) and none that offers a close consideration of students' experiences with detracking in the nested contexts of school and classroom. This study is designed to address both of these concerns through a close consideration of students' experiences with classroom detracking practices in a diverse urban high school.

The study is grounded in the view that classroom research can reveal important links between macro and micro levels of social relations (Omi & Winant, 1986). I see the detracked classrooms in this study as embedded in a larger social, political, and economic framework that is marked by race- and class-linked inequalities. In this setting, working-class minority students are at a distinct disadvantage in their opportunities to access social capital and institutional support in these classrooms and in the school as a whole (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). This "unpacking" of the detracked classroom is an attempt to probe the mystery of how daily events and interactions often add up to large patterns of inequality. Such an attempt can yield useful insights for teachers working in detracked classrooms as well as for researchers and
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policymakers attempting to understand how to better serve students from educationally underserved segments of society.

Context of Study

The context for this study was Cedar High School, a large urban school in a racially and socioeconomically diverse city. Serving more than 3,000 students, Cedar High School's demographics at the time of this study mirrored those of the surrounding community: 40% European American, 40% African American, 10% Latino, and 10% Asian American. Race and class were closely linked at the school, with European American students tending to come from middle-and upper-middle-class families and African American and Latino students coming mainly from working-class or poor backgrounds. The small Asian American student population was divided between new immigrants and long-time citizens; the former group generally was struggling to survive, and the latter had status comparable to that of the local European Americans.

As in many integrated schools and communities (The College Board; 1999), there was a striking achievement gap at Cedar High between African American, Latino, and immigrant Asian American students, on the one hand, and European American and nonimmigrant Asian American students, on the other hand. Despite the diversity of the school, the gap was most often described by contrasting the achievement of African American and European American students. In 1999, a local paper reported the average grade point average (GPA) for European American students as 3.1 and the average GPA for African American students as 1.9. In a report to the Cedar High faculty, a university-based research team presented evidence that students' GPAs were linked to zip code; average GPAs rose along with increases in median income for each zip code. Perhaps most striking was the difference in students' levels of preparedness for higher education based on courses completed and grades earned; 91.8% of European American graduates were eligible for the state's public colleges and universities, but only 26.6% of the African American graduates were eligible. These differences indicated the existence of two separate academic paths at Cedar High, despite the school's commitment to equity.

Cedar High's detracking effort, 8 years old at the initiation of this study, was part of an ongoing effort to combat both the academic and the social failures of racial integration that disturbed many of the school's liberal teachers and administrators. As part of this reform, ninth-grade English and world history classes were paired into core teams, reduced to 20 students per class, and configured to be heterogeneous in race and perceived ability. The goal was to provide all students with a college preparatory curriculum in the core subjects of English and world history, to deepen content by forging interdisciplinary connections, to help ninth graders transition to high school by providing a smaller unit for them within the school, and to combat the racial divide by consciously integrating students across race and ethnicity at the ninth-grade level. The classrooms that were the subject of this study resulted from these reforms.
Method

Methodological Orientation

Although ethnography has long been used to illuminate the cultural understandings of the participants in educational situations, its place in educational policy research has been less common (Trouman, 2001; Walford, 2001). Policy initiatives are often evaluated through quantitative methodologies or though large-scale qualitative studies that rely on survey and interview strategies. In-depth ethnographic case studies of single classrooms over extended periods of time provide us with a different understanding of how policy is lived by its participants and allow us to investigate complex problems embedded in multiple systems (Dyson, 1997; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

This study is grounded in both 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) in larger systems and with how those systems frame the local experiences and possibilities of the individuals and groups with the least power (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Merging these perspectives provides a framework from which to analyze the varied meanings of detracking for its diverse participants, as situated in broader school and societal patterns of racial and socioeconomic inequality.

The study is also designed to elicit the perspectives of student participants in detracking. Recent literature has pointed to the need for greater attention by educational researchers to students' school experiences in general, including their experiences with school reform (Cook-Sather, 2002; Ericson & Ellet, 2002; Oldfather, 1995; Rubin & Silva, 2003; Schultz & Cook-Sather, 2001). Soliciting this underrepresented perspective is acutely important for understanding the impact of school reforms that are based on a reorganization of students' school days and social interactions.

Research Questions

The central question framing this study was, How do students and teachers enact detracking in the classrooms of a racially and socioeconomically diverse urban high school? Subquestions directed at better understanding the experiences of the various participants and the interlocking contexts of detracking at the study site emerged as data collection proceeded. These were as follows:

1. What are the teachers' educational practices in the detracked class, and what led to the development of those practices?
2. How do students navigate the official practices of the detracked classroom? What aspects of identity (both own and peer) become salient as they move through the various participant structures and activities in the class?
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3. With whom do students form friendships both within and beyond the detracked classroom, and how do they explain any patterns that emerge?

4. How do students define, judge, label, and negotiate notions of competence both within and beyond the detracked classroom, and how do they describe and explain differences in achievement?

Participant Selection

Teachers
Sam Apple and Tim James were selected as the focal teachers for the study because of their years of teaching experience, their success as teachers (as judged by collegial reputation and student feedback), their commitment to the idea of detracking, and their willingness to explore its complexities with a researcher. Both are European American men. Mr. Apple, an English teacher in his late forties, had come to teaching 5 years before the initiation of this study, after a variety of professional experiences and a lifetime of commitment to progressive causes. Mr. James, in his mid-thirties, had been a social studies teacher for 8 years and grounded his teaching practice in a commitment to equity and student engagement with significant topics. The two men had worked together for the past several years as partners in the detracked English-history core program. They both approached the study as an opportunity to learn more about their own teaching and the experiences of their students.

Classrooms
The selected classrooms reflected the range of ability levels and the racial and socioeconomic diversity of the school as a whole, allowing me to explore the issues of diversity implicit in the ideology of detracking. The classrooms were paired together as part of a core program that integrated English and social studies for ninth-grade students. Thus all of Mr. Apple's English students had Mr. James as their history teacher. The study centered on Mr. Apple's third-period English class, from which I followed students into Mr. James's second-period or fourth-period history class. Each class had approximately 20 students.

Students
Five focal students were selected as key informants, based on academic, racial, gender, and socioeconomic diversity and willingness to participate in reflective conversations. Although these students were not selected to "represent" particular groups, in a study designed to investigate the differential 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 they 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.

Table 1 summarizes relevant information about the five students selected for in-depth interviewing and closer observation: Grant, Kiana, Mike, Sasha, and Tiffany. The math and language course levels indicate how students were tracked in the rest of their classes, as will be explained below.

The daily schedules and after-school experiences of the five students reflected divisions in the school as a whole. Grant and Sasha, the two European American students in the study, were tracked high in their math and foreign language classes, thereby starting high school well positioned to build transcripts impressive to college admissions offices. Their high-tracked classes were predominantly European American in enrollment, whereas their detracked English and history classes were more racially integrated. After school, both Grant and Sasha participated in enrichment activities (i.e., computer classes, geometry tutoring, and an animation studio internship).

Kiana and Mike, taking entry-level foreign language courses and entry-level algebra, would be able fulfill college entrance requirements as well but would not be able to reach the highest levels of math and foreign language and would not have room for many electives. Their math and foreign language classes were filled predominantly with students of color, and they had more European American peers in their detracked classes than in any other setting. Mike participated in after-school sports; Kiana reported that she spent much of her time at home completing her homework.

Tiffany’s placement in pre-algebra and nonenrollment in a foreign language class meant that she would not be able to fulfill the requirements for admission to the state’s public colleges and universities by the end of high school. Her low-tracked math and science classes were filled almost entirely with African American students, and her detracked classes were her only substantially integrated classes during her ninth-grade year. Tiffany had many home responsibilities, including caring for a chronically ill parent and babysitting for her preschool-aged cousin. She reported having little time after school for homework.

Table 1
Focal Student Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Math</th>
<th>Foreign language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grant</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>European American</td>
<td>Honors geometry</td>
<td>French 3/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiana</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American,</td>
<td>Algebra</td>
<td>Spanish 1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>European American</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Algebra</td>
<td>Spanish 1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sasha</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>European American</td>
<td>Geometry</td>
<td>Spanish 3/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiffany</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Pre-algebra</td>
<td>Not enrolled</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The algebra courses included in this study were entry-level.
Data Collection

This study involved four data-collection phases:

1. **First-semester observations.** I observed in the detracked classrooms under study and in the general school setting three times a week for 3 months to get a sense of the daily practices of the detracked environment and the social dynamics of the larger school context. During each classroom observation I took handwritten notes (a running catalogue of talk and action in the classroom) drew a map indicating where students sat, collected all classroom handouts, and obtained copies of student work produced during that class period. My observations, written up as formal fieldnotes, led to the formulation of interview protocols and the choice of students to be interviewed during the next phase of data collection. The time I spent in the classroom during this period also allowed students to become comfortable with my presence (I am a Jewish American woman of European descent, in my early thirties at the time of the study) before the one-on-one interviews.

2. **Initial interviews.** I conducted in-depth interviews with 10 students and the two focal teachers during the first semester of school. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed for data analysis. The teacher interviews were aimed at understanding each teacher's goals for the detracked classroom, his expectations for his students, and his concerns about and approaches to the practice of detracking. The student interviews focused on the students' daily experiences of school, how they saw themselves and others in terms of academic ability, how they saw the social and academic dimensions of the school and the detracked classroom, how they understood detracking, how they thought the class compared with their other classes, and where they received support.

3. **"Shadowing."** I followed each of the five focal students described earlier to all of their classes for a day each during the second semester of the school year to get a sense of the texture of each student's daily life in school.

4. **End-of-year observations and interviews.** In the final 2 months of the school year I conducted second interviews with each of the study participants and observed in the detracked classroom for several more weeks to explore students' and teachers' views and the academic and social dynamics of the classroom at the end of the school year.

Throughout the data collection process I collected a variety of written documents, including weekly e-mail updates sent by the English teacher to all of the students and their families, class handouts in each class observed, and portfolios of student work with teacher comments. School and community newspapers were another valuable source of written material that helped
me to better understand the nature of the school and community discourse around issues of diversity, achievement, and ability.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study, as in most interpretive studies, was ongoing and iterative (LeCômpte & Schensul, 1999). During the data collection period I periodically composed analytical memos on topics that emerged as significant. The memos formed the basis of my initial assertions and helped to guide the more formal data analysis that followed after the completion of data collection. Formal data analysis began with a rereading of the entire data set, including observer comments and memos. I created a coding scheme based on the constant comparison and grouping of data chunks (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). These codes led to two major analytical categories: the “official” world of the detracked classroom (organizational strategies, activities, and expectations established by the teachers) and the “unofficial” world of the detracked classroom (students' social and academic desires, actions, and presumptions). The study findings describe the dimensions of these two classroom worlds and the collision between them. The participating teachers read and responded to a draft of the findings, as will be discussed in the conclusion.

Findings

The following findings are based on evidence taken from the full range of sources: student and teacher interviews, classroom observations, shadowing notes, and written artifacts. To illustrate the findings, I selected examples from interview and observation transcripts. For each example chosen, there are numerous similar examples in the dataset.

This findings section is divided into three interrelated parts. I first describe the official world of the detracked classroom: the classroom practices built on Mr. Apple's and Mr. James's understandings of the socially and academically polarized Cedar High context. Next I describe the unofficial world of the detracked classroom: the meanings that students made of the same context and practices and their enactment of the official practices. Finally, I consider the convergence of official and unofficial classroom worlds during small group work and the tensions that resulted.

Part 1: The Official World of the Detracked Classroom

Teacher Perspectives on Race, Friendship, and Academic Achievement at Cedar High

The bimodal nature of Cedar High was deeply troubling to many of its teachers, a number of whom considered themselves social activists and saw teaching as a social change career. Mr. Apple and Mr. James, pioneers in the school's detracking and small-learning-community efforts, were among this group.
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achievement gap at Cedar High was of great concern to them, and they saw detracking reform as a way to rectify it.

Mr. James acknowledged the difficulties with detracking, yet remained committed to its possibilities:

My own experience tells me that it's obviously not a panacea, but given the alternatives it seems like the best choice that we have in terms of the things that seem really important to me in education, certainly in terms of the big issues at Cedar High and the achievement gap and everything else.

The problem, according to the two teachers, was not only the gap in achievement between students from different race and class backgrounds, but also the social separation described earlier. These two ideas often merged together, most poetically in Sam Apple's term the "bad split." As he reflected early in the year,

And so we have a bad split. . . . I saw that right away, and it kills you to see that. It's a heartbreaker. You like the diversity but you immediately see the White kids circling the wagons around their own, sort of like, "Oh, I hope I'm not put in a group with Tiffany." And you see the Black kids move into defensiveness and disruptive defensiveness really quickly. And it's the job of the year.

In these two teachers' eyes, social and academic separation walked hand in hand, to form a deeply troubling "bad split." Combating this "bad split" was "the job of the year," central to the values of both men, and a fundamental philosophy shaping their classroom practices.

Teaching Practices in the Detracked Classroom

Although bridging the social and academic gap between students from different race and class backgrounds at Cedar High was a guiding philosophy for the focal teachers, equally influential was their progressive pedagogical orientation, described more fully below. Mr. Apple and Mr. James wanted students to get excited, ask questions, and consider "big ideas," rather than memorize sets of facts, listen to lectures, or write in a prescribed manner. Mr. James described his main goal as to create "a kind of excitement and interest and curiosity that I want to cultivate in students." The implicit connection between the desire to bridge the "bad split" and this progressive orientation was that active, even transformative learning would lead students to realizations about themselves and the world around them. Mr. James related this belief:

One product of students' having that level of engagement is that they start to ask a lot of questions and want to know the answers and explore things in different ways that didn't occur to them or they wouldn't have thought of before.
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In this way, active engagement in a variety of classroom activities, the hallmark of the progressive approach, would lead to both personal and societal change. Both teachers shared the hope that the students would “actually end up participating in some kind of transformation of their own lives as a result of engaging in that kind of critical reflection that allows them to make those connections and think about who they’re going to be.”

This orientation shaped the teachers’ construction of the official classroom environment, leading to an emphasis on active and interactive assignments that maximized student involvement and minimized what the teachers saw as more passive modes of instruction. They used a variety of strategies to position students as active constructors of meaning in the classroom, including such activities as examining slides of artwork from different time periods to understand historical events, writing and sharing autobiographical stories, participating in Socratic Seminar–style discussions on provocative texts, reenacting a factory setting to learn about the Industrial Revolution, creating “identity boxes” to explore issues of representation, and working in small groups to prepare for a historical “press conference.” These practices could be labeled “progressive” in the Deweyean sense: They were learner-centered, designed to engage students in the active construction of knowledge, and intended to build on students’ interests. As Perlstein (2002) notes, such approaches have been an “enduring tradition in American education” (p. 270).

The teachers relied on two organizational models to foster the active participation they sought: the “whole class” participant structure (Phillips, 1972), in which the entire class took part in a discussion or other activity; and the “small group” participant structure, in which students worked on a task in assigned groups. Each participant structure had different consequences for students’ emerging social and academic identities; this article considers the latter participant structure in detail.

Teachers’ Priorities for Group Work in the Detracked Classroom

Mr. Apple and Mr. James, familiar with much of the literature on detracking, felt that small group work was well suited to detracking’s twin goals of integration and educational equity (Cohen, 1986; Cohen & Lotan, 1997; Goodlad & Oakes, 1988; Slavin, 1991; Wheelock, 1992). In accordance with this literature, they felt that, through working together in small groups, students would get to know each other across racial lines, learn to value individual strengths and differences, “shelter” (i.e., make accessible) difficult academic material for each other, and learn valuable social skills. At the beginning of the year Mr. James had his students participate in activities drawn from materials produced by the Teachers Curriculum Institute (a company that produces curricular resources for social studies based on the theories of Elizabeth Cohen and Howard Gardner). The activities were designed to promote effective group interaction.
The underlying principle of group formation for the teachers was that of "balance." Mr. James explained:

So, generally, when I'm putting groups together I'm trying to balance them in a number of different ways—by gender and ethnicity and socioeconomic backgrounds and personality type ... it feels like a very, very inexact science.

Mr. Apple emphasized the need to construct groups around students' academic strengths and weaknesses, telling me that he "looked for skill mixing and compatibility" as well as ethnic diversity. Both teachers tried to achieve a "mix" or "balance" of a variety of academic, socioeconomic, and social characteristics in the small groups, for both academic and social purposes.

One characteristic of a balanced group was variation in academic strength and skill level. The teachers felt that group work would be a way both to assist "weaker" students with more challenging material and to teach all students to value their peers' various strengths or "intelligences." Mr. James felt there was an inherent difficulty, however, in teaching students to appreciate differences in learning styles while still maintaining traditional markers of academic competence. As he told me,

I think it's hard to undo the sense that the smart kids are the ones that can write well and read well. To get students to understand on a simple level that somebody can represent something, say, visually in a really creative way and that's as much of a strength as the strength that another kid might be able to write really well. Not everybody will be good at all of these things, but everybody will be good at least one of them. That kind of mantra. I think that's important, definitely, but it only goes so far in the context where there's still, for a lot of kids, strong internalized values built up over the years.

He attacked this problem by "trying] to raise the status of certain tasks," such as drawing, and consistently assigning activities that used a range of skills—an approach that was consistent with recommendations in the literature.

In spite of the teachers' belief in a "multiple intelligences" approach, small groups in the detracked classroom were nevertheless built with an eye toward balancing "strong" and "weak" students, as defined in a traditional academic sense. "I do build it from the weak kids up," Mr. Apple told me. "I don't build it from the strong kids down." In this way, the markers of competence constructed in the whole class context made their way into the small group context. Students who were competent readers and writers and who kept up with their assigned work were positioned as experts, and those who were seen as having lower skills were placed with their more highly skilled peers, with academic assistance as the implicit goal.

A second feature of a balanced group was racial diversity. Group work fulfilled a democratizing role for the core teachers by bringing "kids who are
different" into proximity with each other. Mr. James felt that group work taught kids to appreciate differences:

It's about teaching them about why we're doing it that way and why it's important for them to be able to work in a variety of different groups with people who they might not choose, with other kids who are different from them, and be able to appreciate those differences and appreciate the different strengths that everybody brings to a group.

Group work was a way for students to learn about one another, appreciate differences, and develop the ability to work with others. The teachers saw this as particularly important in the racially and socioeconomically polarized Cedar High context, in which African American and European American students rarely formed friendships.

Mr. Apple pointed out that constructing groups around racial and socioeconomic difference could be "tricky, especially if Blacks are the racial minority; you're always separating them ... there will be one Black kid in each group." In the Cedar High context, having one African American student in each group usually meant that that student did not have any close friends in that group, and it often meant that that student was also positioned as a "weak" student. This exacerbated the correspondence between race and achievement that loomed large for both students and teachers at Cedar High, as Part 3 of the findings will explore.

The third attribute of a balanced group was a fortuitous combination of personalities. "A lot of it's about—especially the ninth graders—about thinking about who's going to be able to get along with each other," said Mr. James. Mr. Apple put the matter more graphically, dubbing some students "problem-childs" and others "group-makers." "Problem-childs" were hard to place in groups for an assortment of reasons. With them you had "to be careful that they don't get beat up or be insulting." Grant, although a high-achieving European American boy, fit into this category, according to Mr. Apple, because he was difficult to work with and socially inept. Tiffany and her friend Christie fit into this category as well, as they took offense easily and had trouble settling down to work. Other students were "group-makers," flexible and socially skillful "kids that would always make a group work." These students were academically inclined, compliant, and usually doing well in class. Kiana and Sasha were seen as group-makers, and Mr. Apple felt fortunate to have so many of them in his detracked English class.

Part 2: The Unofficial Worlds of Students in the Detracked Classroom

Students' Perspectives on Race, Friendship, and Academic Achievement at Cedar High

Students noted the same divide that so disturbed the teachers, albeit from a less distanced and more varied perspective. How individual students were
positioned in the school context affected their interpretation of the divide, as noted by a mixed-race student writing in the school newspaper:

When I walk out onto the courtyard it's completely segregated. I think that as a mixed person I notice it more than other people do. You know, when one of the races that you are is over here and one is over there, it's so obvious.

The students in this study had various perspectives on this divide, reflecting their different positioning in the social and academic terrains of the school.

Mike, Tiffany, and Kiana thought that the divide between themselves and their European American peers was based on fear and insularity on the part of those students. Kiana, when asked what she thought it would be like to be a European American student at Cedar High, speculated that she would be "scared of getting beat up by Black students," as she thought the school's European American students were. Mike reiterated this notion. "Some of the White people that don't have a relationship with Black people are scared of them," he said, pointing out that this fear was based in a lack of familiarity. Tiffany noted that "a lot of Black kids" thought that European American students did "dumb things" and were "always hanging out together."

Sasha and Grant leapt directly to the academic dimensions of race at Cedar High in their answers to the same question in reverse. Sasha reflected that

the darker your skin is, the less you're respected. . . . The expectation is different. They would expect me to not do as well in class and stuff like that, and when people expect that of you you kind of do what they want in a sense because it really lowers your self-esteem to the point where you're, like, "I guess that's all I can do."

Grant raised the idea that tracking was based on race, saying, "In some of the classes, I'm sure they track things a little differently. . . . I'm pretty sure they do stuff like that. I don't see why." The immediate discursive jump from "African American" to "low academic achievement" made by these European American students indicated the common conflation of race and academic competence at Cedar High.

As these comments indicate, students' social choices were informed by local constructions of race. As Mike explained, "At Cedar it's kind of separated. If you're with the Black group you do whatever they do and if you're in the White group [you do what they do]." Tiffany concurred with this description, saying that it felt like "two different worlds" at the school, "because Black kids over here, White kids in the middle and Black kids everywhere else, and Mexicans way over on the other side."

Students were critical of this separation but resigned to it. Kiana, a biracial student who early in the year had hoped to socialize with a wide variety of peers, later expressed her disappointment:
I wish it could be more acceptable for me to have more White friends and Asian friends and Hispanic and Latino friends, but unfortunately it isn’t. . . . Some people feel like why be friends with someone or a culture that has oppressed and stuff.

Tiffany professed, “I really don’t care who I hang out with,” but admitted, “I have mostly Black friends, though.” Sasha also said she wanted a more diverse group of friends but added, “It seems quite often that they [students of color] don’t want to be friends with me, and I’ve found that people will think that because I’m White I’m prejudiced, so don’t go near me.”

The presumed link between race and academic performance was consistent among all five focal students. In interviews, Sasha, Mike, and Kiana discussed the expectations for competence for students from different racial backgrounds at the high school in ways that reflected their own positions in the school setting. Sasha confided,

If you’re a White girl, you have different expectations. It feels like a lot of the friends I have that are White are, like, “Oh my god, I got a B! My parents are going to be so upset! My teacher’s not proud of me!” I don’t seem to find that problem in a lot of my other friends who aren’t White. Do I sound like I’m being racist at all?

Sasha noted “different expectations” for “a White girl,” but she then reiterated that stereotype herself, implying that White students cared more about their teachers’ views of them and had families who held higher expectations for them than their African American peers.

Kiana had also thought about the achievement gap at Cedar High, but from a different perspective: “I know that most of the AP classes and honors classes are predominantly White, and that’s really disappointing,” she told me. Rather than viewing anxiety about school performance as a “problem,” Kiana was troubled by the disparities she saw. “The thing that disappoints me is the statistics of the majority of Black students at Cedar High are failing and doing real poorly,” said Kiana at the end of her ninth-grade year. Like Sasha, as she reflected on the school success of her friends, race emerged as a salient line of division between higher- and lower-achieving peers. “My White friends,” she said, “do fairly well, whereas my African American friends, my friends of color, they’re just doing real poorly.”

Mike invoked a similar sentiment, attributing his academic success to his mixed race peer group. “Black people who hang out with just Black people, tend not to do as well as White people,” he theorized at the end of the year. “Since I hang out with both I think I do better than most Black people.” Mike, as an academically successful African American male, explained his success by drawing a distinction between himself and lower-achieving African American students who remained in same-race peer groups.

Students’ unofficial worlds at Cedar High, then, reflected the same racial divisions noted by the teachers in the previous section. For students, however,
these dynamics of race, friendship, and academic achievement had immediate
impact, weaving together to shape their daily choices both in the unofficial
spaces of the school and in the official practices of their detracked classrooms.

Students' Observations About the Official Practices
of the Detracked Classroom

The official practices of the detracked classroom, as described above, empha-
sized active and collaborative participation. Students understood that partic-
ipation was a marker of being a good student in this context. As Sasha
remarked, "You always have to participate. . . . Actually, you have to think
about what you're saying. . . . When someone says something totally random
that makes no sense, it's just kind of pushed to the side and ignored and we
keep going."

Grant also drew conclusions from what he saw in the whole class setting.
He asserted:

You can tell some people study a lot and some people really work hard
in the class and some people just slack off. . . . It gets annoying some-
times in class when somebody's completely off ball, not knowing what
everybody's doing, and then somebody moves ahead of the class.

Kiana drew a distinction between students who appeared to be doing well
because of their active engagement in class discussions and those who were
actually completing their assignments:

I know some people that have the most brilliant things to say con-
stantly in class. Talking, contributing to the discussion and they never,
do their work. There are some people that are so quiet, never talk,
but they're always sending in their work.

Students observed and drew conclusions about each other's academic com-
petence in these whole class forums. This had consequences for their group
work preferences, as is described below.

Students' Priorities for Group Work in the Detracked Classroom

In contrast to the value that teachers placed on balancing the membership of
small groups for racial and academic diversity, students' concerns about group
membership were far more personal and pragmatic. Students wanted group
members who were academically competent, fun to be with, motivating, and
respectful. Many of these attributes were in conflict with the criteria that the
teachers used when configuring small groups. Students based their judgments
about with whom they would want to work in a small group on how their
peers displayed themselves in the whole class context, on the stereotypes
drawn from the particular school context, and on their previous experiences
with individuals in small group settings.
Unpacking Detracking

One quality of a good group member was academic competence. Students' definitions of academic competence in the small group setting were consistent with the earlier discussion of what made a good student. Thus a good group member would be someone who is "always reading" (Grant), who "does the work" (Kiana), who does not "play around" (Mike), who "actually works" (Sasha), and who does not "like to mess around" (Tiffany).

If the teachers were structuring groups for a "balance" of academic skills, however, it would not be possible for every group member to have the traits of the "good student." Groups were built around "weak students." Thus some students came into the small group setting bearing reputations as "bad students": students who "don't really pay attention in class" and "don't do their work" (Grant), "don't want to learn" (Kiana, Sasha, Mike), "don't even try" (Sasha), and who are "rude" (Kiana; Mike). This was a difficult position to hold in a group setting and often led to a reduction in responsibility for those students, as we will see in the episodes that follow.

Another characteristic of a good group member was that she or he be "fun" to work with. This was consistent with the more social and intimate setting of the small group participant structure. Sasha told me that she wanted to work with "someone who could joke around. When you work really, really hard, after a while you get really, really punchy, and you just want to stop and joke around." This sense of "fun" was often easier to achieve between students with shared cultural assumptions and previous social connections. As will be described in Part 3 of the findings, some students were able to fulfill their desire to have fun in their small groups while continuing to meet academic goals and maintain the teacher's approval. For other students, choosing to have fun with friends in their groups meant sacrificing academic goals, an approach that attracted negative attention from the teacher.

Some students spoke of desiring group members who were "motivators" and could keep the group moving along. These students were the "group-makers" of whom Mr. Apple spoke, and they were in demand. Grant told me he would like to have in his group "somebody who's kind of social and sort of a leader. I might pick Sasha. She's good at that. . . . Somebody who'll just keep us all working on the same thing and not let us go on to something we're not supposed to do." Mike also looked to other group members for motivation. He told me, "I try to pick people who I know will do the work and they'll be committed. Then I will too, so it will work real well." Tiffany looked for this as well, saying she would like to work with "Kiana and Nora and Terry. Because they're really smart and they help me a lot." Sasha, perhaps sensing her role as group-maker, complained, "I don't like coming up with it all by myself." Both Tiffany and Kiana mentioned respectfulness as an essential quality of a group work partner. Tiffany said earnestly,

I don't like some people in the class because their attitude is very bad. You could just ask them a question and they'd be, like, "I don't know. Ask the teacher." And I really hate that. If somebody asks you a question, don't get mad at you for asking you a question.

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Tiffany hated it when people would "tell me the answer" rather than "helping me find it." Aware of how she was perceived by her peers, Tiffany sought groupmates who would be able to help her without positioning her as incompetent. The teachers' intentional placement of lower-achieving students with higher-achieving students ran the risk of exacerbating this dynamic, as higher-achieving students tended to feel frustrated with their lower achieving peers in group situations, as the comments by Grant, Sasha, and Kiana indicated.

There was a racial dimension to the issue of respect, as hinted at by Kiana's comment at the very beginning of the article about being disrespected in group work situations. Although Kiana was a higher achieving student, she described being disrespected by her peers in the same way that Tiffany did. She complained that they "treated me like I was ignorant," and she implied that this assumption was racially based. Mr. Apple noted this dynamic and commented on the tendency of some higher-achieving European American students to avoid their African American peers as group work partners. Mr. James observed:

That, to me, is one of the big tensions with the White kids in particular. This attitude that they'll pay a certain lip service to the idea of detracking ... The achievement gap is a big problem, and we talk about it. They understand that, and yet at the same time they have this attitude that kids of color in the class are the ones who don't get it and are disruptive and in a lot of cases stand in the way of these really important personal goals that they have for wanting to get that education ... It gets voiced in different ways. I was thinking about it because sometimes it gets voiced in the context of group work. When I've chosen groups and when students say: "Mr. James, Frankie won't do any work. It's really hard to be in a group with him. I don't know what we're supposed to do."

Although the teachers attributed this "attitude" on the part of some of the higher achieving European American students to those students' fear of not doing well in class, Tiffany and Kiana felt that such attitudes were rooted in a lack of respect for them. Underlying tensions rose to the surface when students were placed in groups with peers about whom they held preconceptions or from whom they did not feel that they received respect.

Thus, whereas teachers configured groups on the basis of difference, students frequently desired a compatibility rooted in sameness. Teachers' assignment of students to particular groups was often at odds with students' own grouping desires. Group assignment based on academic and racial attributes dovetailed neatly with the preconceptions that students formed about each other in the nested contexts of the detracked classroom and the whole school context. Part 3 presents excerpts from episodes of small group work to draw out the dimensions of the clash between the official and unofficial worlds of the detracked classroom.
Part 3: Worlds Collide—Group Work in the Detracked Classroom

For students, Cedar High was marked by racial polarization of both friendship and academic achievement. Students' unofficial understandings of their social and academic possibilities, forged in the larger school setting, reemerged in the official practices of the school's detracked classrooms. Nowhere was this more evident than when students were assigned to work in small groups. Thus a close examination of these settings provides a particularly revealing window into the dynamics of classroom-level detracking, although similar dynamics were found in the whole class setting as well.

Scenes from three separate group work episodes described in my fieldnotes—"Group Quiz," "Map Work," and "Preparing for a Press Conference"—and from students' comments from interviews illustrate this finding.

**Seeking Balance/Reiterating Difference**

The teachers' "balancing" of students within small groups was sometimes obvious to students and led to awkward situations. In the following excerpt from my fieldnotes, Mr. Apple assigned students to groups by writing a set of names on sheets of notebook paper taped to each grouping of four desks. As the students circulated through the classroom looking for their assigned groups, Tiffany had trouble finding her place:

**From "Group Quiz" episode**

"I don't see my name!" shouts Tiffany, looking around the room quickly.

"Does anyone see Tiffany's name?" Mr. Apple asks of the class.

"Here!" shout a few voices, from the back of the room. It is the back left-hand corner table where Giant sits with three other European American students, Maggie, Pete, and Dan. All four are high-achieving students. Tiffany goes over and looks at the group, but, as there is no empty seat, does not sit down.

"There ain't no chair," she shouts angrily across the room to Mr. Apple. "This is a little bitty table!"

Mr. Apple continues to explain the quiz, until he notices Tiffany standing against the wall behind her group's full table, her arms folded across her chest; a somber expression on her face. He interrupts himself, saying,

"I see an imbalance. Dan, can you move over here?" He points to the last empty seat in Christie's group. Christie is an African American girl and Tiffany's friend.

"I don't see why Tiffany can't sit here," says Christie, plaintively.

"I do," Mr. Apple replies, as Dan moves into the desk across from Christie. Tiffany sits down in his place, next to Grant.
In this episode, Mr. Apple moved a European American student out of his assigned group to make way for Tiffany, although there was an open seat in a nearby group, making it clear that race and perhaps academic skill level were unstated criteria in his group-making process. This was an awkward situation for Tiffany, in particular. She first had to stand outside an already full group awaiting a chair. The teacher’s action on her behalf then precipitated the removal of another student from his seat. In the end, she was not allowed to sit with her friend and was seated with three students she did not know well, an uncomfortable position for her, as was noted earlier.

Students understood the racial basis of group selection and sometimes had their own interpretations of it, as in the following excerpt from the fieldnotes:

From “Group Quiz” episode

Christie finds her name in a group with two European American boys and two empty desks. She swings her backpack up onto one of the empty desks and sits down, exclaiming:

“You trying to get all the Black kids away from each other, before we cause a nuclear holocaust!”

CLAP! She punctuates this statement with a loud clap of her hands.

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

When left to their own devices, students often went to great lengths to sit with friends, with same-race grouping a frequent result. The following took place after Mr. James told his class to form groups to work on a map exercise about Latin America:

From “Map Work” episode

The students get to work right away, some moving into groups and others working alone. Sasha, who is sitting next to her friends Nora, Jason, and Artie, all three European American, pulls closer to them, and they begin to work together. Natalie, the only African American girl in class today, leaves Sasha’s side of the room and goes over to the other side of the room to sit near Frankie, the only other African American student who is in attendance.

The desire for fun and mutual respect described in the previous section often led students to want to work with friends rather than those they did not know well. In this episode it was easy for Sasha to work with her friends. She had been seated near them in the teacher’s whole class seating arrangement, and,
through quick eye contact, they were able to move their seats slightly and group together without drawing attention. For Natalie, however, it was much more difficult. To work with Frankie, the only other African American student in class that day, she had to walk across the entire room, drawing attention to herself and to the lengths she was willing to go to work with a same-race peer. In this manner, the small group participant structure drew attention to racial differences in the classroom whether or not the teacher chose groups.

Intimacy and Interdependence Bringing Tensions to the Fore

Small groups provided a setting for student interaction out of the teacher’s direct supervision. With a small number of students sitting close together, facing one another with their backs to the rest of the class, such groups provided an intimate arena for social interaction and brought together students who had not previously been in such close proximity to one another. Such groups increased student interdependence as well, as students attempted to share their workload fairly, negotiated task assignment, instructed and questioned each other, and held one another accountable for completion of work. The intimate and interdependent aspects of small group work served to highlight racial and socioeconomic tensions already pervasive in the larger school context.

The small-group work setting gave students a chance to hold extended nonacademic conversations. In the following excerpt from my notes, Sasha, Tommy, both European American, and Frankie, an African American student, were supposed to be working together to prepare for a simulated press conference about the French Revolution. Instead, as ninth graders often do, they were discussing their middle schools.

From “Preparing for a Press Conference” episode

Frankie turns to Sasha and asks her, “What school you go to last year?”

“Cedarville Prison Camp,” she replies, a sarcastic tone in her voice conveying her disgust with her previous school.

“What?” exclaims Frankie, sounding shocked and surprised that Sasha [a White girl, and obviously middle class because of her dress, speech, academic persona] was in a prison camp last year. He doesn’t realize that this is a joke name for the private school she attended.

“C.P.C.—Cedarville Prison Camp,” says Sasha emphatically, as though this clarifies things. Her tone indicates that she presumes the initials “C.P.C.” will be meaningful to Frankie.

“I’d hate to go to private school,” says Tommy, somewhat scornfully. He knows the school that Sasha is referring to and is in on the inside joke of the name.

“They call it Cedarville Prison Camp?” asks Frankie, perplexed, now not understanding why a private school would be called a prison camp.

“Country Pastures Circle,” Sasha explains, “but we call it “Cedarville Prison Camp” because there’s high fences around it.”
"That's because they're afraid of someone coming in and [said in a smarmy baby-talk voice] hurting their children," says Tommy, mockingly.

"It's just for the little kids," says Sasha, embarrassed.

Sasha and Frankie's misunderstanding demonstrates how the distance in students' out-of-school worlds emerged within the unofficial interstices of the official classroom setting. Sasha's mocking name for her old school only made sense in a particular social class context—one that was so isolated from the idea of a prison camp that no confusion about the nickname would be possible. Tommy, although part of Sasha's social world, attempted to distance himself from it through sarcasm, leaving Sasha feeling awkward and embarrassed. In this way, group work was a site within which larger social and economic disparities made themselves felt in students' daily school lives.

Working in small groups increased students' interdependence. Students were faced with the complex tasks of distributing workload, holding each other responsible for completing tasks, and making sure that each group member was on track with his or her assignment, as in the following excerpt from my notes:

From "Preparing for a Press Conference" episode

"Do you understand all of this?" Tommy asks Frankie, "Because they'll ask you some hard-ass questions."

"Will we have to answer every last one of these questions?" asks Frankie.

"You might," says Sasha. "I think they'll be a lot more complicated though."

"Start working, man," says Tommy to Sasha. "You haven't done anything this whole period."

"I have, too!" exclaims Sasha, affronted. Tommy has done most of the preparation work with Frankie so far and seems annoyed at Sasha for not carrying out her role.

Frankie, Sasha and Tommy seem to have negotiated these tasks fairly well, working through the tensions arising in the interdependent group setting to reach a mutually agreeable division of labor, albeit with some degree of irritation evident. Not all students were able to do as well. The following conversation shows how small group work could result in the domination of the group by one strong personality.

From "Group Quiz" episode

Grant is looking up the answers to the quiz in the book and dictating them to Maggie, who is recording them on a piece of notebook
Unpacking Detracking

paper. Pete is beginning the drawing. Grant directs the group's activities, telling Maggie what to write and Pete what to draw. Tiffany sits and watches this activity.

“How did Piggy die?” says Maggie, reading the next quiz question from the board. “He fell over the cliff and the boys threw rocks at him,” she continues, answering the question.

“No,” says Grant sharply, “they pushed Piggy over the cliff.”

“Well that’s how it happened in the movie,” Maggie replies, quietly.

Grant emerged as the unofficial leader of this particular group, directing the content of each group members' task and weighing in with the final word on the quiz answers. The group leadership skills of many ninth graders are less than adept, and Grant was no exception. He did not include any of his group members in discussion of the quiz questions and he failed to assign Tiffany any role whatsoever. So, at best, small group tasks provided students with the opportunity to learn collaborative skills, gain experience negotiating complex arrangements with peers, and employ personal strengths in the service of the group. At worst, students were not up to the complex interpersonal negotiations such work entailed, with consequences for their opportunities to learn and their sense of academic identity.

Opportunities to Learn and Achieve, Consequences for Academic Identity

Students' opportunities to learn and practice skills, to achieve academically, and to form positive academic identities all were shaped in these groups. Opportunities to learn varied according to the nature of the tasks that individual group members were made responsible for. Opportunities to achieve academically differed among students who could easily mesh social and academic goals and those who could not. The small group setting heightened peer influence on the social construction of academic identity.

Students' opportunities to gain and practice academic skills in the small group setting varied according to which tasks they engaged in. When Mr. Apple noticed that Tiffany had not been assigned a role in her group, he attempted to rectify the situation:

From “Group Quiz” episode

Out in the hallway Mr. Apple and Tiffany discuss how she could participate in the group quiz, given that she has not completed the reading.

“What could you do?” he asks her. She replies that she could do the ocean. Tiffany comes back into the room with Mr. Apple and together they go over to her group.

“Let her help with the drawing,” Mr. Apple says to the group.
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"I'm a help with the water," says Tiffany loudly, in a baby-talk voice, "I'm a doing the water," she repeats, in a singsong. "I can do the water. Like that one?" she points at a drawing on the wall.

Although well intentioned, Tiffany's assignment, to draw the water, did not give her access either to the content of the book or to the skills to be gained by attempting to answer the quiz questions. Mr. Apple's adjustment of Tiffany's role allowed her to become a participant in the small group as a social setting, but neglected her academic progress.

In many small group situations, as in the one just described, the students who were deemed least skilled were given tasks with the least opportunity for gaining and practicing skills, while the most academically competent students were given frequent opportunities to hone their already ample skills. In "Preparing for a Press Conference," for example, Frankie, a lower-achieving student, was assigned the role of "actor" by his fellow group members, while Tommy and Sasha, both higher achieving students, took on the roles of journalist and press agent. In these roles, Sasha and Tommy sharpened their historical knowledge through reading and discussion, while Frankie took his instruction from his peers and was told only what they felt he needed to know to credibly fulfill his role. Likewise, in the "Group Quiz," Grant held the book and searched for, phrased, and dictated answers, while his group members drew what he told them to and recorded what he said. Grant spent an hour practicing useful school skills, while his group members became skilled at listening to Grant.

Whether students could smoothly mesh their academic and social goals in the small group setting had academic consequences. Some students could easily work with friends and do well academically. Sasha's student-chosen group is an example of this:

From "Map Work" episode

In Sasha's group, Sasha, Jason and Artie are looking for the answer to Question 14.

"What is the plain that covers most of central Argentina?" Sasha asks rhetorically. "Pampas! [with a short "a"] Pampas diapers!" she replies, answering her own question.

The four students giggle at this play on words. They continue to work together to fill in their individual worksheets, laughing and joking as they do so.

This group continued to enjoy each other's company. At one point Jason and Nora engaged in a brief mock 'battle' fencing with their pens, as Sasha danced in her seat. Later, Sasha listened intently as Nora narrated, with more animation than she had shown all year in class, a story about something that happened after school the day before. At the end of the class period Mr. James stood at the board to give the evening's notebook assignment. Two groups
of students were talking and laughing among themselves—Sasha's group, and the group with Natalie and Frankie, across the room.

From “Map Work” episode

“I'm stopping,” says Mr. James, responding to the noise in the room. Sasha looks up, alert and tense, seemingly caught in the act by the teacher.

“I'm worried about the threesome in the corner,” say Mr. James, looking at group with Frankie and Natalie, and not even glancing at Sasha's group. Sasha visibly relaxes, and then raises her hand to ask the teacher about the due date of a major project. As she leaves the classroom she exclaims to me:

“I'm unusually hyper. That's cool!”

Sasha and her group members were getting their work done but not at the expense of their social interaction. As they worked, there was a good amount of joking, gossiping, and flirting, none of which drew the teacher's attention because they were also conspicuously completing the assignment as they chatted. Group members contributed to completing the task without struggling over work allocation or questioning each other's competence. Sasha's choice of friends allowed her to neatly mesh her social and academic worlds at Cedar High. “I don't hang out with people that really don't care because they're so different,” she said at the end of the year, with not a hint of conflict in her voice.

For Kiana, the choices were more complex. As the school year progressed, she came to identify closely with the African American peer group at Cedar High. However, working in a small group with Tiffany and her friend Christie, the two other African American girls in her English class, put her in a bind. “I feel at times they're dead weight, as awful as that sounds,” she said, describing Christie and Tiffany as small group members. Kiana could work with higher achieving students, but she needed to be selective, as she had experienced a lack of respect from some of them. And, as she told me at the end of the year, she faced disapproval from African American friends if she became affiliated too closely with European American students. The small group context heightened the conflict Kiana experienced between her academic and social goals in school.

Tiffany had an even smaller window of convergence between academic and social success. Tiffany wanted to work with Kiana, who she felt could motivate her in a respectful way. She had trouble getting work done with her other friends, however. “Christie and I talk a lot,” she reported. As discussed earlier, she felt a lack of respect from other students in the class. For Tiffany, small group work was more likely than not to be difficult and uncomfortable, both socially and academically. When the teachers chose the groups, she ended up working with peers she felt did not respect her and, unless she ended up with Kiana in her group, when she chose her own partners, she often ended up with peers who did not complete their assigned tasks.
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Students' academic identities, their senses of themselves as students, were shaped in these small group settings. Students had the opportunity in these settings to show off their expertise in a particular area, gain reputations as good students, and impress their peers with their intellect and skills. The opposite was true as well: Small group work could accentuate a student's deficiencies in the eyes of his or her peers.

In the "Group Quiz" episode, as mentioned earlier, Grant quickly took on the role of expert, directing his peers in their completion of the quiz. His peers and the teacher allowed him to do this, adding to his sense of himself as a competent, even superior student. "I'm so far ahead of this stupid class I'm bored," he told Mr. Apple. His domination of the group made sense to him: "I often find that . . . I've done the reading, so . . . I'm looking through the book while everybody else is socializing." Group work reinforced rather than challenged his sense of being far ahead of his peers.

Tiffany, on the other hand, was effectively excluded by the other members of her group. When she finally sat down with them, after clearly signaling her reluctance to do so, they made no attempt to involve her in the assigned task. Grant, Pete, and Maggie worked on the quiz without asking Tiffany for help or even telling her what they were writing down and asking if she agreed. At one point, Grant asked if he could "borrow" her book (after asking the other group members first). When she volunteered the book, rather than ask her to look up answers, he handed the book over to Pete to carry out his orders. The social interaction among the three European American students also contributed to Tiffany's exclusion from the group work activity. As they joked together and made references that seemed obscure or irrelevant to Tiffany, they solidified their social relationships and reinforced her isolation from the group.

At the end of the "Group Quiz" episode, the consequences of all of this for Tiffany's sense of herself as a student became clear:

From "Group Quiz" episode

"Can we go sit outside?" Tiffany asks, calling across the room to Mr. Apple. Out in the hall Mr. Apple asks Tiffany what the problem is.

"They don't want me in their group. They don't think I'm smart," she tells him.

Beyond a simple mismatch of paradigms, the clash between the teachers' official practices and the students' unofficial interpretation and navigation of those practices sometimes had unfortunate consequences for student learning and academic identity.

Conclusion

The explicit goal of detracking is to contest race- and class-based inequalities in schools, but in this ethnographic case study, despite the best efforts of committed teachers, these inequalities were often reinforced rather than
challenged. “Unpacking detracking” for this study involved an unraveling of the complex relationships between the classroom world, schoolwide social boundaries, and the world beyond school to understand how this reiteration of inequality occurred. Jean Anyon writes, “Our systems of social class and racial organization are significant impediments to the success of restructuring and other reform attempts” (1997, p. 13). Detracking is certainly affected by these imbalances in the wider society. The educational problems that created the need for detracking are rooted in systemic inequalities along race and class lines, which detracking reform alone cannot fully address.

This study suggests that teachers can, in some cases, conflate a commitment to progressive pedagogy with the desire to combat educational inequalities, to the detriment of the latter. In other words, the student-centered, active-learning approach central to progressive educational practice may wrongly be assumed to be the best or sole means for improving the achievement of underserved students. As Delpit (1988) points out, struggling students may benefit more from explicit academic skills instruction and coaching in the language and culture of power than from the exclusive reliance on approaches in which such knowledge is presumed. Several researchers have noted that progressive pedagogy can have the ironic effect of reinforcing the very patterns that equity-minded teachers are ideologically committed to disrupting, by continuing to privilege the cultural capital of children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds over those with fewer economic advantages (Bernstein, 1990; Delpit, 1988; O’Loughlin, 1995; Walkerdine, 1988). This irony was both apparent and disturbing to the teachers who participated in this study. After reading a draft of the study findings, Mr. Apple commented that although he felt that I had really captured what went on in his class, both he and Mr. James were “depressed” by the depiction and intended to reevaluate some of their practices, particularly with regard to the skills development of struggling students.

The difficulties encountered by Mr. Apple and Mr. James were not due to inadequate or atypical implementation of progressive pedagogical strategies. The teaching practices of these teachers faithfully reflected practices recommended in the relevant literature. Instead of attributing the conflicts described in this article to a flawed application of recommended pedagogy, it may be more useful to consider the larger social patterns at play that make detracking a less-than-straightforward reversal of tracking; tracking and detracking are not like “forward” and “reverse” on a car.6

This study indicates that the use of progressive pedagogies within detracked classrooms, while well intentioned, cannot alone resolve the inequalities permeating that setting and may in some ways reinforce them. Indeed, these pedagogies often miss the mark by failing to provide the concrete instructional support that struggling students need to meet the higher academic expectations of detracked classrooms. Tiffany, for example, had difficulty in meeting the increased expectations of the detracked classroom because of her overwhelming home responsibilities and lower-than-grade-level academic skills. Targeted tutoring or support classes, or a combination
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of both, have been shown to be effective in supporting such students (Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva, 1994; Rubin, 2003; Slavin, 2002). If, alongside her detracked courses, Tiffany had been enrolled in a support class for assistance with her reading and writing assignments and had been allowed extended time to complete them, she might have been better positioned to participate in the “Group Quiz” and other classroom activities. Struggling students need more than the assistance of their peers to raise their academic skills. Indeed, it does not seem realistic to expect that students in small groups will put their peers’ learning above their own desires for a good product and grade. Thus detracking must be coupled with targeted attention to the needs of individual students if reformers do not want the reform to skip lightly over the lowered academic skills and resource inequities that are central to the educational inequalities they wish to address. Explicitly training teachers in detracked classrooms to meet these and other challenges and creating new structures to support students in reaching raised expectations will increase the reform’s potential for success.

If detracking is to have any measure of success, a way must be found to bridge the gap between teachers’ official practices and students’ unofficial social worlds. In this study, the students’ social worlds, framed by larger school and societal rifts, were intricately embedded in each interaction in the detracked setting. Kiana’s fear of working in a small group with students who were not already her friends, Tiffany’s exclusion from the endeavors of her assigned group, and the movement of students into same-race groups during “Map Work” all reflected the extension of schoolwide social boundaries into the classroom setting. Detracking reform, however, depends on diverse students’ harmonious social interactions for its success and thus may call for a more conscious form of adult intervention in students’ social worlds. Ninth-grade students are good targets for such intervention because their social relationships are in flux as they struggle to find a place for themselves in unfamiliar territory. Beyond the individual classroom, meaningful orientation activities for ninth graders and small advisory groups that meet frequently with a mentor can break down barriers and help student to forge new connections with one another.

Larger changes in school structure can address this issue as well, such as creating smaller schools-within-schools that would explicitly foster community among diverse students. Also important is a reconsideration of the social spaces of the school, such as hallways and lunchrooms, which in many urban schools encourage defensive huddling rather than friendly mingling. The creation of safe and friendly-feeling spaces on school grounds would be a meaningful improvement for students and might facilitate the collaborative interaction of students both within and beyond the school’s detracked classes. This is not to imply that students should be discouraged from forming communities with those with whom they feel they have the most in common. Separate spaces for minority students within integrated schools provide support and affirmation that often cannot be found in the larger school setting (Weis & Centrie, 2002). For detracking to be effective, however, students also need to be able to work together comfortably.
Despite the problems described in this article, detracking reform holds promise for students. The very existence of detracking indicates to students that their school is committed to equity. Students who typically would be tracked into low-level courses are often aware of what this means both for their daily lives in school and their future possibilities. Christie, Tiffany’s best friend, said that the biggest problem with tracking was that there was “a lot more racism. A lot more making fun of people... Like in my pre-algebra class, it’s all Black kids in there. So therefore, like, say for instance the higher English class [if English was tracked] might have, like, one or two Black people in there.” Yoshi, another classmate, echoed this concern with the link between tracking and race, telling me, “When they were tracking, a lot of the colored kids would be, it seems like, in a lower track. All the White kids and everything would be in higher tracking. I think you should get the same education no matter who you are.” These students saw detracking’s potential as an antidote to the institutionalized racism that they felt was embedded in the very structure of their high school, signaling an anti-racist commitment on the part of the school.

Yet, as these findings suggest, detracking alone is not enough. It is necessary to go beyond both the placing of students with different educational backgrounds in the same classroom and the implementation of progressive teaching strategies to build a structure and pedagogy explicitly designed to counter the effects of years of educational inequality. As Christie noted, “I also think it’s kind of bad [detracking] because all of the people who would have been in the lower level, like, they might get lost; they might not be able to keep up.” The resources devoted to enabling students “who would have been in the lower level” to succeed academically in their detracked classes should be equal to the resources devoted to high-level course offerings and enrichment opportunities for students at the other end of the academic spectrum. This approach is potentially a more radical reform even than detracking itself, because it entails a redistribution of resources within schools from the most privileged to the least privileged students and calls for a serious consideration of how to redress inequalities that stem from beyond school doors.

Notes

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1 All names of people and places in this manuscript are pseudonyms.
2 “Core” refers to the pairing of English and history classes for purposes of interdisciplinary learning in the ninth grade at the high school discussed in this manuscript.
3 This particular core was situated in a “small school” within the larger school. Thus the level of interaction between Mr. Apple and Mr. James was unusually high for a core team at Cedar High. The two men had chosen to work with each other, and both were deeply committed to implementing reforms to improve education for all students at Cedar High.
4 The “focal” teachers and students were the key informants of the study, selected for in-depth interviews and close observation.
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I was part of a school–university collaborative research project during the year before conducting this study. This connection facilitated access and assisted me in building relationships with the focal teachers during the course of the research.

Thanks go to Barrie Thorne for this metaphor.

Christie is an African American girl. She was enrolled in pre-algebra and not enrolled in a language class her ninth-grade year, effectively placing her in a lower track in her non-detracked classes.

Yoshi, a male student who self-identified as a mix of African American, Japanese American, and Mexican American, lived in a predominantly African American neighborhood, and most of his friends were African American. He was in entry-level algebra and entry-level Spanish in his ninth-grade year, effectively placing him in a “general” track in his non-detracked classes.

References


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