



Equity Dispatch

From De-Tracking
To Universal Access

March 2015



IMPACT: *Educate, Engage, Empower - for Equity*

(Click words to navigate to sections)

"I can see myself in all things and all people
around me ."

~ Sanskrit Phrase

Educate

Tracking: Limiting Universal Access

Meet the Authors

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Equity Spotlight

While schools and school districts may be racially integrated and diversely populated, there are policies and practices that can contribute to the racial isolation of students (Mickelson & Everett, 2008), limiting universal access to rigorous academic opportunities. In response to the growing pressures placed on schools and districts to perform well on high-stakes, standardized tests, many schools rely on tracking to separate students into groups based on perceived ability (Welner, Burris, Wiley, & Murphy, 2008). Tracking, or ability grouping, is the practice of separating students within classrooms, schools, and districts based on student perceived ability and/or performance level. The practice of tracking students in specific education programs or ability grouping emerged during the turn of the 20th century as a way to prepare students for their place in the workforce (Cooper, 1996).

Students perceived to have high abilities and skills were often provided more intense and rigorous academic instruction than students perceived to have lower abilities (Cooper, 1996). Based on the belief that tracking establishes a "good fit" between the level of the instruction and students' learning needs, tracking assigns students to particular course levels such as advanced, honors, standard, or basic math, English/language arts, science, and social studies (Oakes, 1994). While students of color are overrepresented in low tracks (Welner et al., p. 2008), they are underrepresented in high track classes (Oakes, 1994). These stratification structures in schools put limits on the access of students placed in low-tracks. Unfortunately, this practice continues to be "one of the most common sources of race and class stratification of opportunities to learn in American [U.S.] schools" (Mickelson & Everett, 2008, p. 536).

Problematizing Tracking

Educators' notions of ability, race, and class, as well as the political and social context of a community, continue to shape opportunities students are afforded in schools. Within schools, factors such as students' race, ethnicity, and class shape educators' perceptions of appropriate class placements (Rubin, 2008). Thus, depending upon the sociocultural context, students and their abilities can be framed from an asset or a deficit perspective (Rubin, 2008). Race and class differences are both locally situated and framed by larger societal discourses and patterns of inequality. Educators' beliefs about the attributes of students such as their behavior, native language, and race can influence student placement; meaning that merit alone does not explain track placement, so it is important to consider the role of race and class (Rubin, 2008). The idea that "instruction in tracked classes is tailored to meet students' academic needs is difficult to support in light of the preponderance of studies that identify the many non-academic factors that influence track placement" (Welner et al., p. 2008).



Dr. Eric Witherspoon has been Superintendent of Evanston Township High School District 202 (ETHS) since 2006. During his tenure ETHS has made strides toward being a more equitable school by breaking down a tracked enrollment system. Dr. Witherspoon proposed the plan in 2010, laying out a vision in which "we are challenging all freshmen to their fullest potential and creating clear pathways for ETHS students to accelerate their learning and take the most challenging courses during their four years" (2010, p.1).

While proposing the detracking program, Dr. Witherspoon pointed to structural and systematic barriers to student success. In a press release, he wrote, "We have learned that adding more programs will not foster the high academic achievement we expect for all of our students. We must change structures at ETHS to increase expectations and opportunities for all students.

Current education reform strategies emphasize high academic standards and challenging curricula for all students, yet this does not occur when students are ability grouped. While many educators insist that leveling courses permits teachers to tailor instruction to the ability level of their students, others argue that creating homogeneous classrooms does not produce the most effective and efficient learning environments (Mickelson & Everett, 2008). When grouped by perceived ability, students placed in lower tracks do not receive the same quality nor quantity of instruction (Rubin, 2006; Welner et al., 2008). Research asserts that students in low tracks are provided fewer learning opportunities with less engaging materials and resources (Oakes, 1994; Rubin, 2006). This type of instruction depresses student achievement and leaves students placed in lower tracks demoralized and demotivated (Welner et al., 2008). Furthermore, low-track classes are more likely to be taught by underqualified teachers. Since course levels tend to produce permanent academic tracks, achievement gaps between students placed in high and low tracks widens over time (Oakes, 1994; Welner et al., 2008). Despite substantial research indicating the ineffectiveness and inequities that tracking creates, the practice is still found in most U.S. high schools (Welner et al., 2008).

Tracking works against high achieving students as well. Because many schools use high cut-offs for their gifted and talented courses, many capable students are denied the opportunity to engage in an enriched or accelerated curriculum (Ascher, 1992). Advocates of tracking often raise concerns that heterogeneous grouping of students would expose high achieving students to a less rigorous curricula (Hallinan, 1994). Heterogeneous groups ensure all students have access to high quality curriculum, teachers and material resources, regardless of their race or class background, perceived academic ability, or previous school performance (Rubin, 2008). Heterogeneous groups benefits all learners, affording learners valuable diverse perspectives that are crucial to development of critical thinking skills (Rubin, 2006). Many proponents of ability grouping insist that high achieving students would be negatively affected by de-tracking even if the high track curriculum remained; yet the research contends that high achieving students continue to make gains in tracked schools because they are exposed to an enriched curricula (Ascher, 1992).

Toward De-Tracking and Universal Access

However, imagine an integrated learning environment where all students are included. Where, given the right supports, all students could be successful in accelerated coursework. This learning environment would not only respect students' diverse perspectives, but actively include them as productive contributions to learning (Rubin, 2006).

We cannot continue to relegate students to less-challenging courses and then expect them to reach high levels of proficiency" (ETHS, 2011). Additionally, he explicitly identified the inequities evident when low achievement for some students can be linked to race/ethnicity (Rado, 2010).

ETHS is documenting positive results in narrowing opportunity gaps for students. This is due to an effort to provide systematic supports for all students. Dr. Witherspoon explained, "When students have the academic skill preparation and abundant support to succeed in our most challenging courses, they are enrolling in those courses to take fuller advantage of the fine educational opportunities available to them at ETHS...It is particularly noteworthy that the percentage of nonwhite students who now understand that they belong in AP classes has increased dramatically" (ETHS, 2014).

Upcoming Events

(Click event name for more information)

Curriculum would have multiple points of entry so that it is accessible to all students working at various levels. Flexible, cooperative learning groups would be apparent as all students would be challenged and actively engaged (Rubin, 2006). By having universal access to rigorous academic opportunities, all students are empowered to develop their various capacities, educators are supported to enhance their abilities to differentiate, and schools would develop reliable systems to support learning of challenging material (Rubin, 2006).

Many schools have moved toward detracking in an effort to raise the rigor for all students. Detracking is the dismantling of ability driven grouping practices, thus affording all students access to high quality curricula. Many proponents of ability grouping assert that low achieving students would feel frustrated with the same curricula that higher achieving students receive, yet many studies contradict these concerns (Welner et al., 2008). During their study, Welner, Burris, Wiley, & Murphy (2008) documented a school district during its process of de-tracking its middle school and high school, offering all students a rich, accelerated curriculum in heterogeneously grouped classes. Their study found that heterogeneous grouping of students, rigorous curricula, and support structures for struggling learners such as afterschool tutoring drastically improved achievement scores while simultaneously reducing the achievement gap. At the same time, teachers and administration communicated a belief that all students could achieve. This led to a transformation of student beliefs about their achievement and contributed to all students receiving equitable opportunities to learn.

While there are a variety of ways that a detracking policy can be enacted, Ascher (1992) contends that more important than any specific strategy is creating a culture of de-tracking. Creating a culture that promotes detracked classes and equitable opportunities to learn for all students requires that the entire school community--administrators, teachers, parents, and students--be involved in a commitment to be inclusive. Critical stakeholders must believe that every student has the right and ability to learn from a high-quality, rigorous curriculum as well as from each other (Ascher, 1992; Ruben, 2006). De-tracking is most powerful when "changes in instruction, institutional structures, and belief occur simultaneously to support the academic success of all students in newly challenging and stimulating ways" (Rubin, 2006, p. 5)

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Engage

Illinois

April 16-20, 2015

American Educational
Research Association
(AERA) Annual Meeting
Chicago, IL

Indiana

April 7, 2015

Just 3%: A Panel
Discussion on the
Recruitment and
Retention of African
American Teachers in
STEM
Indianapolis, IN

Michigan

April 26-29, 2015

Race in 21st Century
America: The 9th
National Conference
Prior Lake, MI

Minnesota

April 26-29, 2015

2015 National Forum on
Dropout Prevention for
Native and Tribal
Communities
Prior Lake, MN

Ohio

April 16-17, 2015

2015 STEM Conference
Cleveland, OH



Evanston Township High School

[Evanston Township High School District 202](#) (ETHS), located in Evanston, IL, has recently implemented a de-tracking initiative for its ninth grade students. ETHS is moving toward a more inclusive model to increase opportunities to learn for all students. The initiative begins with ninth grade students taking untracked humanities and biology courses that can launch them into Advanced Placement courses (Levy & Julian, 2014). The model, called Earned Honors, is a response to gaps in advanced course enrollment and performance, as well as observing that classrooms did not reflect the school's racial/ethnic composition. As Dr. Pete Bavis, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum/Instruction explained, "Our hallways are very diverse, but as soon as the bell rang, students would segregate into their classrooms" (personal communication).

In Earned Honors courses, students engage in a curriculum aligned with Advanced Placement, ACT College Readiness Standards, and the Common Core Standards. ETHS has worked to increase the rigor for ninth grade students by requiring more reading, writing, and critical thinking aligned with skills necessary for success in Advanced Placement courses (ETHS, n.d.)

ETHS has introduced [systematic supports for students](#) and teachers to address both technical and socio-cultural needs. Students have access to Writing and Homework Centers, as well as Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) and Steps Toward Academic Excellence (STAE) programs (ETHS, n.d.) Students can also join [teamASAP](#) (Team Access & Success in Advanced Placement) to support each other socially and academically, and to combat feelings of isolation (Bavis, personal communication.)

Teachers have received a great deal of training in differentiated instruction to meet the needs of a heterogeneously grouped classroom (Levy & Julian, 2014).

Wisconsin

April 27-28, 2015
Minority Student
Achievement Network
(MSAN) Institute
Madison, WI

Wisconsin

April 15, 2015
NAME Educators'
Network for Social
Justice Teaching
Conference
Franklin, WI

They also systematically engage in Courageous Conversations (Singleton & Linton, 2006) in order to surface and address implicit racial/ethnic bias that may limit opportunities for students of color (Bavis, personal communication).

The ETHS model seems to be making strides toward equity. Data reveal more diverse representation in advanced courses and higher student achievement outcomes for students in all racial/ethnic categories (Bavis, personal communication; Levy & Julian, 2014.) ETHS is continuing with detracking to ensure all students have meaningful access to rigorous academic courses.

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Empower



Something to Read!

Accountability, Rigor, and Detracking

This [longitudinal study](#) examines the long-term effects on the achievement of students at a diverse suburban high school after all students were given accelerated mathematics in a detracked middle school as well as ninth-grade 'high-track' curriculum in all subjects in heterogeneously grouped classes. Despite considerable research indicating the ineffectiveness and inequities of ability grouping, the practice is still found in most American high schools. Research indicates that high-track classes bring students an academic benefit while low-track classes are associated with lower subsequent achievement. Corresponding research demonstrates that tracks stratify students by race and class, with African American, Latina/o, and students from low-socioeconomic households being dramatically over-represented in low-track classes and under-represented in high-track classes.

Something to Watch!

A Reading of the Letter from Birmingham Jail



This is a [non-fiction film](#) released by the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity. The film commemorates

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail." The film stars community leaders of Columbus, Ohio and educators and leaders of The Ohio State University. The Letter from Birmingham Jail is an open letter written on April 16, 1963, by Martin Luther King, Jr. The letter defends the strategy of nonviolent resistance to racial discrimination, arguing that people have a moral responsibility to break unjust laws. After an early setback, it enjoyed widespread publication and became a key text for the American civil rights movement of the early 1960s.



Something to Use!

Successful Detracking in Middle and Senior High Schools

This [article](#), provided by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, discusses six strategic constructs to be aware of when engaging in detracking a school or school district.

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