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0521560764 - Constructing School Success: The Consequences of Untracking  
Low-Achieving Students

Hugh Mehan, Irene Villanueva, Lea Hubbard and Angela Lintz

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

I am the youngest of a family of three – my mother and one sister twenty-two years older than I. My sister never lived with us. My mother, being a single parent, and working two jobs just to keep a roof over us, had little or no time to spend with me. I remember feeling an extreme sense of insecurity as I was growing up. Later, my mother remarried a wonderful man who I would grow to love and respect. He filled my life with all the love and warmth of a family.

After eight years of having a secure family, the effects of my parents' separation nearly destroyed my life. The world of love and security which they had built came tumbling down. I remembered in years back how it had felt to be homeless and I was terrified. I kept asking my mother, "Where are we going to live?"

All those feelings of insecurity and loneliness I had felt while growing up slowly started to come back. I then started eating large amounts of food. Although I did not know it at the time, my struggle with bulimia had begun. At fifteen my life was a disaster, and my grades during that time reflect it. My next regrettable move was dropping out of school. My mother, being too preoccupied with her problems, found it difficult to deal with mine. The strong sense of belonging to someone or something led me to associate with a bad group of people, which in turn resulted in my short stay at Juvenile Hall. My mother then decided we were going to move from Sacramento to San Diego.

Things slowly started changing when we moved. I enrolled at Saratoga for the second semester of my tenth-grade. With the fresh start God had given me, I was determined to change my life and put all my energy in school. My GPA when I began at Saratoga was a 1.3. Now with the help of AVID (a program designed to help students have a greater chance of going on to college) it is a 3.7. I am taking

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two AP classes which I had never dreamed possible. I know the joy of learning and the sense of accomplishment that comes with doing the best I can. Learning beyond the book has been one of the most rewarding experiences in my high school career. One of my philosophies is if at first you don't succeed, keep trying until you do, which is one of the reasons I have taken the ACT once and the SAT twice. One of the most important things I've learned is how to manage my time more wisely. Knowing that to be accepted into a prestigious college I would need to improve my previous grades, I decided to take two classes in summer school, and to keep my two jobs.

Two things I enjoy doing when I'm not in school or working are volunteering to work with inner-city kids and working at "Casa de Cuna" (House of the Crib). The inner-city kids are at high risk of dropping out of school. I personally try to instill in them the belief that higher levels of education can be their ticket to success and that in turn will be the road out of the ghetto. "Casa de Cuna" is a Catholic orphanage in Mexico, a project I became involved with shortly after I arrived at Saratoga. Each student that is involved does his or her part in raising money, helping out with garage sales, car washes, and helping out with the cleanup of the orphanage. I am also an officer of "Los Hispanos Unidos" (United Hispanics), a club at Saratoga. The goal of this club is to raise the percentage of Hispanic students graduating from Saratoga, and also to have a higher number of those who graduate go on to college.

I plan to apply the strength and determination that have enabled me to be successful in high school throughout my college career. My battle with bulimia, growing up in a dysfunctional family, and working with children who have no family at all played a key role in my decision to pursue psychology as a major. My family's education has never extended beyond elementary school. I plan to change that if I am given the opportunity.

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**T**HE LIFE HISTORY TOLD BY LILIA ORTIZ IN HER COLLEGE application essay is gripping. Here we have a young Latina who grew up in a single-parent family, suffered the pain of her parents' divorce, had bulimia, and served time in Juvenile Hall. She is presently living in a mobile home park with her mother, who speaks only Spanish. Given the severity of these circumstances, we might expect that she is destined for a miserable life. Although her mother supported Lilia's college plans, she didn't know the details about required courses and tests, application forms and deadlines, scholarship possibilities and procedures. Lilia acquired vital information about colleges and established an academic record sufficient to be accepted with a Martin Luther King, Jr., Scholarship at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and San Diego State University.

By all accounts, Lilia is academically successful, at least to this point. This story runs counter to the trends being reported nationally – that Latino students are not successful in high school, they are dropping out in record numbers, they are not enrolling in college. But this story is not unusual for the Latino and African American students who are completing an “untracking” program called “Advancement Via Individual Determination” (better known by its acronym, AVID) in San Diego, California. The AVID approach to untracking places previously low-achieving students (who are primarily from low-income and ethnic or linguistic minority backgrounds) in the same “college prep” academic program as high-achieving students (who are primarily from middle- or upper-middle-income and “majority” backgrounds).

## THE ROLE OF TRACKING IN EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

Untracking stands in stark contrast to prevailing educational policy concerning the education of students. Historically, educators in the United States have responded to differences among individuals

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and groups by separating students and altering the content of the curriculum to which they are exposed. Since the 1920s, most high schools have offered a “tracked” curriculum – sequences of academic classes that range from slow-paced remedial courses to rigorous academic ones.

### **The Rationale for Tracking: Matching Talent to Jobs**

Tracking starts as early as elementary school. Students who have similar skills are placed in small working groups, often called “ability groups,” for the purposes of instruction. Students who have less measured ability are placed in low-ability groups. Students with greater amounts of measured ability are placed into high-ability groups. The curriculum in low-ability groups is reduced in scope, content, and pace relative to high-ability group classes. Often an informal arrangement in elementary school, tracking becomes institutionalized in middle schools and high schools. Students who have been assigned to the “college prep” track receive a distinct curriculum and are separated from students who have been assigned to the “vocational” track.

Tracking rests on assumptions about the nature of the occupational structure and the role of schooling in an industrial society. Tracking was justified at the height of industrialization because it supported a long-standing belief in the United States and Great Britain that a crucial function of schools is to prepare students for jobs (Davis & Moore, 1945). The industrial revolution divided labor into jobs and occupations that require different kinds of skills. As a result, workers who have different kinds of knowledge were needed to fill those different kinds of jobs. The function of the school was to serve as a rational sorting device, matching students’ talents to the demands of the workplace (Turner, 1960). Thus, rigorous academic classes could prepare students heading for jobs that require college degrees, whereas vocational programs could prepare students for less skilled jobs or for technical training after high school.

Tracking students for different work lives was thought to be fair because students were thought to possess different intellectual abil-

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ities, motivations, and aspirations and jobs demand different skills and talents. Thus, a tracked curriculum with its ability-grouped classes was viewed as both functional and democratic. Tracking was functional because it matches students to the appropriate slots in the work force, thereby providing the nation with the range of workers it needs. Tracking was democratic because schools sort students based on their talent, effort, and hard work, thereby providing students with the education that best meets their abilities (Davis & Moore, 1945; Parsons, 1959; Turner, 1960).

### The Critique of Tracking: Neither Functional nor Democratic

Recent research and public commentary have shown that the schools' practice of tracking does not fulfill either of its promises. It neither provides students with equal educational opportunities nor serves the needs of employers for a well-educated albeit compliant work force. Students from low-income and ethnic or linguistic minority backgrounds are disproportionately represented in low-track classes and they seldom move up to high-track classes. Students placed in low-track classes seldom receive the educational resources that are equivalent to students who are placed in high-track classes. They often suffer the stigmatizing consequences of negative labeling. They are not prepared well for the workplace.

Accounts of the *differential distribution* of students to ability groups and tracks have been summarized comprehensively by Oakes, Gamoran, and Page (1992). The distribution of students to high-, middle-, and low-ability groups or academic and general tracks seems to be related to ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Children from low-income or one-parent households, or from families with an unemployed worker, or from linguistic and ethnic minority groups, are more likely to be assigned to low-ability groups or tracks. Furthermore, ethnic and linguistic minority students are consistently underrepresented in programs for the "gifted and talented."

The relationship between students' background factors and track placement is exacerbated by organizational arrangements. Students

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tend to go to neighborhood schools. Even though high schools in the United States and Great Britain offer comprehensive programs, these schools differ in the curricular opportunities they offer students. Schools serving predominantly poor and minority students offer fewer advanced and more remedial courses in academic subjects than schools serving more affluent and majority students. Even in comprehensive high schools designed to bring students from different backgrounds together under one roof, researchers have found a strong relationship between socioeconomic background, ethnicity, and educational opportunity. The relationships are both simple and direct. The greater the percentage of minorities, the larger the low-track program; the poorer the students, the less rigorous the college prep program (Oakes et al., 1992).

Researchers also report *differential treatment* of students once they have been placed in different tracks. Within elementary school classrooms, ability groups are taught by the same teacher, but they do not receive the same instruction. Low-ability groups are taught less frequently and are subjected to more control by the teacher (McDermott, Godspodinoff, & Aron, 1978; Wilcox, 1982; Collins, 1986). Students in low-ability reading groups spend more reading time on decoding activities, whereas students in high-ability groups spend more time on text comprehension and deriving the meaning of stories. High-group students do more silent reading and, when reading aloud, are less often interrupted (Allington, 1980; Eder, 1981). High-ability groups progress farther in the curriculum over the course of a school year, and this advantage can accumulate over the years. As a result, students with a sustained membership in high-ability groups are likely to have covered considerably more material by the end of elementary school.

In secondary schools, low-track classes consistently offer less exposure to less demanding topics whereas high-track classes typically include more complex material. Lower-track students take fewer math and science courses, and these courses are less demanding. Students in non-college prep curricula take fewer honors or advanced courses. Students in the academic track take three to five times as many advanced courses in math and science (Gamoran, 1987). Students in nonacademic tracks take more courses in the arts

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and vocational subjects because they have more room in their schedule for elective courses.

Teachers set different goals for students in different groups and tracks. High-group, high-track teachers more often state that they want their students to be competent and autonomous thinkers. In contrast, teachers of low-track classes more often emphasize basic literacy and computation skills and present topics commonly associated with everyday life and work (Gamoran, 1987).

In addition to gaining differential access to curriculum and instruction, students in different tracks get different kinds of teachers. Some schools allow teachers to choose their teaching assignments based on seniority, whereas other schools rotate the teaching of low- and high-ability classes among teachers. In either case, it is not uncommon for class assignments to be used as a reward for teachers judged to be more powerful or successful and as a sanction against teachers judged to be weaker or undeserving. Many teachers covet high-track classes because they find students in these classes more willing to participate in academic work and they pose fewer disciplinary problems. Whether schools assign teachers or teachers choose their assignments, students in low-income and minority neighborhoods are more likely to get less experienced teachers than students in more affluent neighborhoods. For example, teachers of low-track classes at the secondary level in math and science are consistently less experienced, are less likely to be certified in math or science, hold fewer degrees in these subjects, have less training in the use of computers, and are less likely to think of themselves as master teachers (Oakes et al., 1992). A vicious cycle for low tracks is the result. Repeated assignment to the bottom of the school's status hierarchy may demoralize teachers, reducing their competency, which in turn may give students who have the greatest need for the best teachers the least qualified teachers.

Perhaps the most damaging criticism of tracking is that it takes on a castelike character. Once students are placed into low-ability groups, they seldom are promoted to high groups. Ability group membership in elementary school carries into track membership in high school. Students placed in low-ability groups in elementary school are more likely to be placed in general and vocational tracks

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in high school, whereas students placed in high-ability groups in elementary school are more likely to be placed in college prep tracks in high school. Placement in vocational and nonacademic classes can trap ethnic and linguistic minority students despite their good achievement in school, as this biographical sketch of a Latina high school student illustrates:

My first day signing up for high school . . . my Dad had been working in the fields, but he came home early this day to take me so I could get registered. . . there was a counselor . . . and I took my eighth grade diploma which was straight As, and I was valedictorian of my eighth grade . . . and I told him I would like to go to college and could he fit me into college prep classes? And he looked at my grades and everything, and said, well, he wasn't sure I could handle it. My dad didn't understand. He was there with me. And this counselor put me in non-college prep classes. I remember going home and feeling just terrible. (Gándara, 1995: 73–74)

In a word, then, tracking is undemocratic. Although originally justified because schools presumably sorted students on the basis of achievement and not ascription, tracking has carried a racial, ethnic, and social class bias from its inception. At the turn of the past century, low-level academics and vocational training were thought to be more appropriate for immigrant, low-income, and minority youth, whereas rigorous academic preparation was seen as better meeting the needs of more affluent whites.

At the turn of this century, proponents say that tracking is necessary because many students, especially those from low-income linguistic and ethnic minority backgrounds, come to school ill prepared for rigorous academic work and would be better served by a program that prepares them for jobs as soon as they finish high school. But when students are tracked on the basis of class, race, and ethnicity and not on the basis of individual effort and achievement, students in tracked schools are denied equal access to educational and occupational opportunity.

Not only is tracking undemocratic, it is not functional. It has not accomplished its job of matching the talent of the students with the



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demands of the workplace. Starting with the critique of American schools contained in *A Nation at Risk*, a steady stream of employers, policy makers, national opinion leaders, and educators has expressed dissatisfaction with students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The following comments are typical of the complaints that were lodged against America's public schools by business leaders and policy makers in the 1980s:

We have created an economy that seeks literate, technically trained and committed workers, while simultaneously we produce many young men and women who are semi-literate or functionally illiterate, unable to think critically and untrained in technical skills. (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989: 1)

More than half of our young people leave school without the knowledge or foundation to find and hold a good job. (U.S. Department of Labor's Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1992: 1)

Telephone sales jobs are going begging in Boston because MCI cannot find qualified workers; textile workers are no longer able to operate their computerized machines; and aircraft manufacturers in California have teamed up out of necessity to train employees. Companies such as New York Telephone report hiring frustrations of epic proportions – 57,000 applicants had to be tested to find 2,100 who were qualified to find entry level technical jobs.

The cry from America's boardrooms, education think tanks and government officials is two-fold: America's workers are ill-equipped to meet employers' current needs and ill-prepared for the rapidly approaching high technology, service oriented future. (Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, 1990: 23)

As the comments from the commission report just quoted show, changes in the nature of work itself contribute to dissatisfaction with the present tracking system. Increasingly, the organization of work has shifted from manufacturing and industrial to service and

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skilled technology. These jobs require workers to think their way through unfamiliar problems, be more literate, and be able to use sophisticated computers and other technologies. Being literate in skilled technology jobs means something different than it does in industrial and manufacturing jobs. Whereas assembly-line workers needed only enough literacy skills to sign their paychecks, workers in skilled technology jobs must interpret, compare, and analyze all manner of printed information, including graphs, charts, and tables.

**UNTRACKING: ALTERNATIVES TO TRACKING**

Recognizing that tracked schools are both inequitable and ineffective, educators have been exploring alternatives to tracking practices since the 1980s (Wheelock, 1992). Some of the reform efforts focus on restructuring the manner in which decisions about personnel, curriculum, and instruction are made at the school site level whereas others focus more sharply on the tracking system. We review some of these reform efforts briefly in order to give a flavor of some current reform efforts and to contextualize the AVID untracking effort. Although not all of the reform programs we review explicitly frame their activities as untracking, the end result of their efforts is a school that mixes students heterogeneously and provides them with academically rigorous curricula.

**School-Based Untracking Efforts**

The Accelerated Schools Project (Levin, 1987) is an example of an approach to school change that provides an enriched, challenging environment rather than a remedial one for underachieving students. The Accelerated Schools Project is as much a way of thinking about academic excellence for all students as it is a concrete process for dismantling the tracking system. Project schools do not follow a prescribed checklist for change. They do engage in a systematic