

The Wrong Track

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KEEPING TRACK: How Schools Structure Inequality. By *Jeannie Oakes*.^A *Yale University Press*. 231 pp. \$21.50.

Yet another "search for excellence" is accelerating demands for programs to benefit the "gifted and talented" at one end of the educational spectrum and the "difficult learners" at the other. In other words, more tracking! Jeannie Oakes's new book arrives just in time to let us know what tracking has actually accomplished in American education and what its impact has been on students and society.

Oakes demonstrates, with substantial evidence, that students have radically different and unequal schooling experiences depending on their race and social class. The disparity is not primarily due to differences in educational funding, parental wishes, local tradition or unequal genetic structures, as is usually claimed, but is instead the result of tracking, the sorting of children into separate "ability"

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groups (high, average or low).

Although Oakes uses a variety of sources to build her case, she relies most heavily on data collected from 13,719 students and their teachers in twenty-five representative high schools. This data lends powerful documentation to the argument that our school system has long had a built-in structure for maintaining inequalities based on race and class. Much of the difference in school outcomes, she argues, can be explained by what happens to students *in* schools, and much of that difference rests on tracking.

This is not a new argument, but *Keeping Track* is the most thorough effort I've yet seen to document it. Theodore Sizer's *Horace's Compromise*, based on a study of American high schools, begins by acknowledging that the major determinant in students' school experience, both curricular and extracurricular, is social class. John Goodlad, author of *A Place Called School*, a comprehensive analysis of American schooling from kindergarten through twelfth grade, makes the same point. His study is, in fact, the primary source for Oakes's data.

Despite this evidence, tracking has not been a major issue in any of the recent prestigious commission reports

on educational reform. At first glance these reports appear to aim at undermining tracking, since most of them call for imposing uniform standards on all students. But as their recommendations for more course requirements, reduced options, more frequent use of standardized tests and stiffer promotion standards are implemented, it has become increasingly difficult to find alternatives to tracking. One of the tragic results of these recommendations has been the rise in both truancy and dropout rates among students who find themselves at the bottom of the schools' achievement (and economic) ladder. Those youngsters have been tracked out of school entirely. Meanwhile, the alarmist tone of the reports—meant to awaken the nation—has first and foremost awakened parents who have the power to insure that their children shall receive the very best (and, if possible, at public expense).

If much of Oakes's argument is reminiscent of the 1960s, we should remember that the reform efforts of the 1960s accepted tracking as a given and, in effect, mandated it by requiring that Federal resources be utilized in classrooms available only to the poor. Such Federal programs also played a major role in increasing a school's dependence on standardized test scores as a legitimate means of sorting pupils into different categories, and in contributing to the now burgeoning empire of Special Education as an accepted dumping ground for those who formerly occupied the lowest tracks. Each year, approximately 5 to 10 percent of our youngsters, variously labeled "educationally disturbed," "learning disabled," "retarded" or "emotionally disturbed," are marched off into special programs. They rarely return to the mainstream settings, and certainly not to the upper tracks in American high schools. (The demand for Special Education stems, of course, from the desperate situation of handicapped children. That it has often buttressed tracking rather than preparing students for mainstream classrooms, as it was intended to do, is a tragedy.)

One new feature of Oakes's argument is that she has directed her attention to tracking in high schools instead of concentrating on primary education. In the 1960s, even the most ardent advocates of the common, heterogeneous primary school accepted the notion that it was not possible to mix students once they

reached high school. Many progressives dealt with the dilemma by favoring "comprehensive" high schools which were then divided into honors, general and vocational subschools, on the assumption that young people would meet in sports, student government or the school chorus. In fact, notes John Goodlad, they don't.

Oakes acknowledges that good intentions are responsible for both the rationale behind tracking and the fervently held convictions that still undergird it. Among those well-intentioned assumptions are the following:

§ Students learn better in homogeneous groups (above all, bright kids suffer when mixed with slow learners).

§ All students, including the academically weak, feel more comfortable in homogeneous groups.

§ There are fair ways to determine who belongs in which track.

§ Teaching is easier when students are academically alike.

Oakes's careful analysis of an impressive range of data leads her to conclude that not one of those assumptions is based on evidence. Not only do students not do better when they are tracked, but what they actually do is so qualitatively different from track to track that comparing their performances is deceptive. She documents her case meticulously, noting contradictory material where she found it, and acknowledges the grave problems facing schools that might seek to change.

The hundreds of tracking studies carried on over the years, she reports, point to one clear conclusion: there exists no evidence that any group (high, average or low) "has been found to benefit consistently from being in a homogeneous group" (emphasis in original). A few studies showed that high-track students did better in "enriched" classes set aside for bright children. However, most high track-level students did not show any measurable difference in accomplishment whether they were tracked or placed in mixed classes. Average and slow students, on the other hand, were consistently damaged by tracking in virtually all measurable areas—academic performance, self-image, attendance, behavior, participation in extracurricular activities and delinquency in and out of school. And these results have been obtained in studies that controlled for other student attributes that might confuse the findings.

It is ironic, and regrettable, that the importance of this kind of data is so widely ignored even by those whose progressive views it might be expected to advance. If proponents of egalitarian schooling can be accused of mushy-headedness and a refusal to face "hard facts," opponents of egalitarianism are even more resistant to hard evidence when it comes to tracking.

Promotional policy is another area in which hard data has been ignored by reformers in their pursuit of "excellence." Despite overwhelming evidence that "retention-in-grade" does not produce the intended beneficial effects, leaving students back in the name of excellence has recently become the law in state after state. As a strategy for keeping some students from ever getting to high school, nonpromotion may have its successes, and tracking, as Oakes demonstrates, may inadvertently serve the same end. It would be nice to believe that Oakes's evidence on tracking will be taken more seriously than the data establishing the uselessness of nonpromotion as a method for improving school performance.

At the heart of Oakes's work is a careful documentation of the way in which students are sorted and of what goes on at each level. In addition, she looks at the data on untracked classes, a small but significant number of which exist in the sampled schools.

The tracks are never equidistant. The high and average tracks share similar goals. The low-track classes resemble neither. The higher the track, the more academic the climate: both students and teachers see the purpose of the course in terms of learning about content, learning to be critical thinkers, exercising greater independence, solving problems, analyzing, reasoning and evaluating. Low-track teachers and students agree on management goals like learning to be quiet while the teacher talks, improving study habits, being punctual, conforming to rules, getting along with one another. Relationships between students and teachers and the degree of student involvement in course work show similar patterns; though few students in any track were very engaged or involved, the lower the track the greater the passivity. Interestingly, in that small but significant sample of classes where low, average and high achievers are mixed, the classes replicate the climate and content of the average or high tracks.

Oakes provides a provocative chapter on the history of tracking, and in her later chapters makes an effort to see how her data fits into several larger theories of American education. She suggests that her evidence might support the theory of cultural reproduction put forth by, among others, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis in *Schooling in Capitalist America*. She also addresses the constitutional issues that might bear on tracking, the relationship of vocational education to tracking and the dilemmas of teaching in unmixed classes.

But the major impact of Oakes's book is its relentless, almost tedious, marshaling of data regarding the "unequal distribution of knowledge in a direction that favors the already privileged." It is, in fact, so relentless in this respect that it may not be as widely read as it deserves to be.

Perhaps we now need more anecdotal and descriptive material to go alongside this kind of work. We may need to see in vivid detail what it means for children to experience such consistently anti-intellectual and academically arid schooling year in and year out in classrooms set aside for failures. Quantitative data alone, based on school records and multiple-choice paper-and-pencil interviews, cannot, as Oakes acknowledges, explain how this kind of schooling affects both the self-esteem and the world view of its participants.

In its way, the American rhetoric of educational equality may do even more damage to a youngster's sense of self-respect than the more blatant class distinctions fostered in European working-class and lower-class schools. The belief that "you can be anything you want to be if you work hard enough" is deeply embedded in school practices and, according to Oakes's data, is deeply believed. For all the blessings of this individualist ideology, it also leaves scars on those who fail. It creates injuries of the sort Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb explored in *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. The victims, they argue, accept responsibility for their marginal status even as they complain of the injustice that has consigned them to it. They are acutely sensitive to having missed out on the "good life," which they nevertheless view as the reward for individual achievement rather than collective social action. No wonder, then, that the American left has had such difficulty building a progressive agenda for

reform: twelve years of feeling unworthy to join the "good life" of the more successful students in school does little to bolster confidence in the worth of one's family, friends and social class.

The ability of American educational rhetoric to mask the way that schooling affects a person's sense of worth as a member of any larger community may be its most insidious element. Democratic institutions require accepting responsibility both for oneself and for the honor and well-being of a larger group. That's not an easy balance, and it hardly ever operates without tensions. For it to occur one must see oneself as belonging to a valued community. It is this opportunity for membership that tracking denies to at least one group of students.

By restricting access to excellence in schools, tracking limits the economic and social mobility of many young people. It also guarantees that one group of our citizens will spend their formative years in an environment that systematically deprives them of publicly acceptable ways to make a contribution to or be valued by their community. This is hardly equity. Worse, it is hardly appropriate to an education for democratic life.

"There is every reason to believe," concludes Oakes, that "there are essential, intrinsic qualities in the values and processes that promote equity" that also "result in the highest levels of achievement." This book provides important evidence in defense of this central and critical democratic belief. □