



DEMYSTIFYING DETRACKING AND TRACKING



It's such a pervasive part of our educational system that it sometimes skates by unnoticed. Known variously as tracking, streaming, leveling, and ability grouping, it is the practice of grouping students by perceived or assessed levels of ability.

In a recent installment of *Teaching While White*, a podcast hosted by educators Jenna Chandler-Ward and Elizabeth Denevi, NEPC director Kevin Welner of the University of Colorado Boulder explains the practice, its effects, its history, and its alternatives.

Chandler-Ward and Elizabeth Denevi created the *TWW* podcast “to move the conversation forward on how to be consciously, intentionally, anti-racist in the classroom.” Because tracking has a long and harmful history of racism and racial stratification, they asked Welner to help their audience think about this often unnoticed practice.

Today's tracking, Welner explains, is typically “choice-based” in that students and their families are given at least some sort of opportunity to request a higher or lower track in specific subjects. Yet research has found that this has not changed patterns of stratification by race and class. White students and students from more affluent families are more likely to be enrolled in the high tracks, while Black and Latinx students and students from lower-wealth families are disproportionately represented in the lower tracks.

Because lower tracks have lower expectations and a watered-down curriculum, students in these classes fall further and further behind. Tracking, Welner says, reifies initial perceived differences and then creates structures to reinforce those differences.

He traces this phenomenon back to the origins of tracking—which tends to ramp up at inflection points when the composition of the student body is changing rapidly. He pointed to

the influx of immigrant from southern and central Europe a century ago, and then the influx of African American students during the desegregation era, and then the influx of students with disabilities following the passage in 1975 of the law now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA.

“Schooling in America and globally used to be the province of the more elite,” he says.

As more children were brought into the schools, particularly with child labor laws taking effect, schools needed to respond to this influx of kids who they never had expected to teach. And that response oftentimes was tied to a variety of expectations and class stratification [and] racial stratification.

As you had students come in from working class families, or from the Black or African American community, or students with special needs, schools responded in pretty the same way each time. ‘Okay, we have to educate these kids, but we shouldn’t be putting them in academic classes—that’s not right for them.’ There’s [also] a huge class and racial overlay to the history of tracking . . . blatant racism and eugenics.

As the podcast progresses, Welner elaborates upon the antidote to tracking: detracking.

Although there will always be a very small percentage of students with highly specialized needs who may benefit from a different setting, most tracking is not justifiable. Done well, detracking provides a rigorous curriculum to all or nearly all students, using deliberately heterogeneous classrooms plus methods such as pre-teaching lessons to students who start out behind so that the material is already familiar when the instructor introduces the material to the full class.

Although teachers may initially balk at teaching classes that are not sorted by “ability” because they fear their students will have too wide a range of needs to accommodate instructionally, Welner notes that, when he and others have taken a closer look at tracked schools, they have shown tracked classes to also be highly heterogeneous in terms of prior test scores. This shouldn’t be surprising, given that students often end up in higher or lower tracks for reasons (such as socioeconomic status or race) unrelated to previous or potential achievement rates. But a teacher approaching a heterogeneous class as if everyone has been carefully sorted is going to fail to differentiate in ways that the students need.

Yet research shows that detracking benefits students who would otherwise have been placed in middle or lower-track classes without harming students who would otherwise have been in higher tracks, Welner notes. He also points to research showing that detracking sometimes benefits those “high track” students the most, likely because of associated reforms that improve teaching.

“If you are someone who sees schools as a foundational element of a fair and democratic society,” Welner concludes, “I think you [also] need to understand tracking as a foundational element of an unfair and undemocratic society and then work to change it.”

NEPC Resources on Tracking and Detracking

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

The National Education Policy Center (NEPC), a university research center housed at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education, produces and disseminates high-quality, peer-reviewed research to inform education policy discussions. Visit us at: <http://nepc.colorado.edu>