We Must Stop Sorting Students: One Teacher's Experience with Detracking

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Flow of Ideas

1. Quick history of tracking → detracking
2. Context of Dave’s teaching
3. Detracking, slowly but surely
4. Student outcomes
Early 1900s Pseudo-Science

Belief: Intelligence (including math ability) is related to race.
Rationale for Tracking

“...we have come to realize the necessity of a differentiated course of study for pupils progressing along each of the so-called tracks...We may refer to these as classes for the ‘gifted,’ ‘bright,’ ‘average,’ ‘slow,’ and ‘special’ pupils.”

(Lewis Terman, 1922, pp. 18–19)
Beliefs about Math Ability

“[The] increase in the school population has given us a wider sampling of the general public and hence has in all probability lowered the level of ability…”

Raleigh Schorling, NCTM President, 1926
Effects of Tracking

Over 85% of U.S. schools track, and track assignment is strongly correlated with demographic markers. Low-track students experience...

- narrow curriculum
- low expectations
- teacher-led lessons
- limited academic success
What Must Change?

- Growth Mindset (Dweck, 2006; 2008)
- Access to Rigorous Curriculum & Supports (Burris, Heubert, & Levin, 2006)
- Opportunities for Reasoning and Sense-Making (Boaler & Staples, 2008)
- Socially/Culturally Relevant Learning (Battey, 2013; Berry & Ellis, 2013; Kisker, 2012)

*Policies and Practices Must Reflect New Beliefs and Understandings about Student Potential!*
Context

Lathrop Intermediate

- 90% low income
- 75% English learners
- Most densely populated city in U.S.
- 90+ gangs
- Declining enrollment
- Teacher staffing issues

TONS OF POTENTIAL!
There are 10 counters in a bag: 3 are red, 2 are blue and 5 are green. If all 10 counters are mixed in a bag, what is the probability that Maxine will NOT pick a red counter?
A little story...

I’ve taught only at Lathrop Intermediate...

- **Student Teaching - Spring 2006**
  - Observed “Honors” and “Everyone Else” Tracks
  - “To take students deeper into content”

- **Teacher of Record - Fall 2006**
  - Only the “Everyone Else” Track
  - Wanted them to go “deeper” too
A little story...

- Mentor Teachers
  - Well respected, solid teachers
  - Need “Honors”
    - Motivation & Learning Behaviors
    - Test Scores

- Observations
  - “Everyone Else” increased at same rate
  - Feedback about scores & behaviors
  - “What do I have to do to pass?” - Student
A little story...

- Detracked “Math Elective”
  - Jacobs, *Mathematics: A Human Endeavor*
- Research
- Ellis (in my ear)
- Difference & Deference
  - Opinions & Perspectives
- Staff Changes in 2009
A little story...

- **Thinking More**
  - Equity & Access
  - Learning Behaviors
  - “Honors” vs “Everyone Else”
  - Research & Ellis (still in my ear)

- **Conversations with Principal & Counselors**
  - “Seeing is Believing”
  - “New” math department…2010
  - Confronting Peers & Fears
  - Detracked/Balanced Classes - Fall 2011 (7th Grade Only)
Some Data...
Change of Heart...

6th Grade Math Teacher - *The Skeptic*

- Behavioral Issues
- Engagement Issues
- Performance Issues
- Role Model Issues
Change of Heart…

7th Grade Math Teacher - The Realist

- Raised the floor without lowering the ceiling
- Peer-to-Peer learning helps everyone
- Behavior issues minimized rather than concentrated
\[2a - b - 3a - b + 2a\]
Impact on Students

- Engagement
- Self-Efficacy
- Achievement
- Attitude
Reflection on Process

• Awareness
• Evidence base
• Build allies (teachers and administrators)
• Start with the “willing”
  • Collaborate
  • Collect data
• Let others do the talking
Thank you! Questions?