Detracking: The Social Construction of Ability, Cultural Politics, and Resistance to Reform

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Structural changes necessary in detracking efforts challenge not only the technical dimensions of schooling, but also the normative and political dimensions. We argue that detracking reform confronts fundamental issues of power, control, and legitimacy that are played out in ideological struggles over the meaning of knowledge, intelligence, ability, and merit. This article presents results from a three-year longitudinal case study of ten racially and socioeconomically mixed secondary schools participating in detracking reform. We connect prevailing norms about race and social class that inform educators', parents', and students' conceptions of intelligence, ability, and giftedness with the local political context of detracking. By examining these ideological aspects of detracking we make a case for reexamining common presumptions that resistance to policies providing greater opportunities to low-income and minority children is driven by rational estimates of the learning costs and benefits associated with such reforms.

> Detracking could fail because those coming from the innate intelligence perspective really believe that it's in the best interests of kids to be separated by some sort of perceived cognitive ability. We all know that that's been a masquerade sometimes for institutional racism and classism.
>
> —Educator at a detracking school

Educators attempting to detrack their schools and move from homogeneous to heterogeneous instructional groupings confront not only the logistical problems of restructuring but also the deeply held beliefs of colleagues, parents, and students about intelligence and privilege that legitimize tracking, especially in racially and socioeconomically mixed schools.

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In promoting detracking reform, educators cannot avoid normative and political struggles in which their critique of current power relations and distribution of opportunities clashes with traditional (and often racist) views of educational opportunity. The different world views, or standpoints, of educators who see the need for detracking and those who do not believe in such reform are culturally dissonant and politically conflictual because detracking butts up against fundamental issues of power and control played out in ideological battles over the meaning of intelligence, ability, and merit.

Some supporters of detracking, such as the educator cited above, are well aware of these normative and political dimensions of detracking reform. Many others are not. Most proceed as if support for their reforms will follow from a demonstration (either by research evidence or example) that the achievement of students from low-track classes will be enhanced while the achievement of students from high-track classes will not be harmed by detracking. Meanwhile, these educators are testing often unexplored technical tasks of teaching students in heterogeneous classrooms, often without the structural or institutional support needed to make their efforts successful. Thus, the chances that they will succeed in making wholesale and significant changes within their schools are diminished.

But those educators who deconstruct conventional conceptions of ability and confront detracking as a cultural and political struggle as well as a more technical challenge can never go back to feeling comfortable with traditional conceptions of students' ability or the segregated track structure of their schools. Because these educators do not see students' ability as a fixed variable over which they have virtually no control, they see themselves as powerful agents in students' learning and they will resist policies and practices that label and define students as failures (Oakes, 1996).

This article draws on data from our study of detracking schools and explores how conceptions of intelligence intervene in efforts to detrack schools. We are guided by three fundamental assumptions grounded in the sociology of knowledge: (1) that human knowledge of everyday social life is socially constructed, rather than objective scientific fact (Berger & Luckman, 1966); (2) that conceptions of intelligence are socially constructed rather than scientifically discovered; and (3) and that schools' responses to differences in intelligence (e.g., school structures and teaching practices) are themselves social constructions, rather than self-evident implications from established scientific knowledge.[1]

We begin with these premises, but the heart of our analysis goes considerably further. We argue that the process of knowledge construction proceeds from and is fundamentally shaped by the cultural and political con-

text in which that process takes place. Specifically, historical and contemporary cultural norms about race and social class inform educators', parents', and students' conventional conceptions of intelligence, ability, and giftedness; these conceptions, in turn, interact with the local political context as schools attempt to implement detracking. We also argue that these prevailing conceptions of and responses to intelligence are grounded in ideologies that maintain race and class privilege through the structure as well as the content of schooling.

To demonstrate these connections, we provide a very brief history of the prevailing conceptions of intelligence and illustrative data from our recently concluded research. That research—Beyond Sorting and Stratification—consisted of a three-year longitudinal case study of ten racially and socioeconomically mixed secondary schools that have been undertaking detracking reforms.[2]

At each of these schools, virtually all the educators struggled to make sense of the individual differences they saw among their students, but they varied widely in how they dealt with these differences and which theories they drew on to help them do so. Furthermore, their varied views of student ability seemed to relate to their attitudes toward detracking. For instance, some teachers did not problematize conventional views of intelligence, which they saw as fixed—either innate or derived from students' cultural backgrounds. These educators thought that by the time students get to middle and high school, it is pretty clear which ones are "smart" and which belong in remedial classes. They did not see much if any need to meddle with the track structure.

Other educators had embraced new views of intelligence as plastic and multidimensional, views that are gaining public visibility and professional acceptance, and thus raised fundamental issues about tracking structures that rigidly compartmentalize students into separate classes for "slow" and "bright" students. Even though these conceptions of intelligence provide essential support for detracking reform, we found that most teachers had only superficial knowledge of these theories and, as in the larger society, the old views of intelligence had not gone away.

Yet there was also a small but critical mass of educators in each of the ten schools who had a powerful critique of more conventional views of ability and intelligence and the ideology that supports those views. These teachers and administrators fought the hardest and longest for detracking because the track structure no longer made any sense to them.

The normative and political connections between various conceptions of intelligence and cultural politics emerged strongly in our study, especially as parents and policymakers articulated their resistance to the schools' reforms. Many educators in the schools we studied struggled mightily to

use their own sometimes tenuously altered normative perspectives as wedges to penetrate the fierce political opposition to detracking reforms and the beliefs about intelligence that support rigid track structures. By examining these more cultural and ideological aspects of detracking we reexamine common presumptions that resistance to policies providing greater opportunities to low-income, African-American, and Latino children are driven by so-called rational, self-interested estimates of the learning costs and benefits associated with such reforms (Sears & Funk, 1991).

THE IDEOLOGY OF INTELLIGENCE

According to Thompson (1990), ideology refers to the ways in which culturally based meanings serve, in particular circumstances, to establish and sustain relations of power that are systematically asymmetrical. Thus ideology, broadly speaking, is cultural meaning in the service of power. According to Gramsci (1971), insofar as ruling ideas are internalized by the majority of the people and become a defining motif of everyday life, they appear as "common sense"—that is, as the "traditional popular conception of the world" (Boggs, 1984, p. 161). And as Lewontin (1992) points out, these commonsense definitions are necessary, particularly in our society, to explain the contradiction between an espoused ideology of equality and meritocracy and the reality of extreme inequality.

From the turmoil in seventeenth-century Britain and eighteenth-century France and America there emerged a revolution-based ideology of liberty and equality that remains prevalent in our society today. But what also emerged was a society stratified in terms of wealth and power, along lines of race and gender. This inherent contradiction necessitated reconceptualizing the notion of equality, toward equality of opportunity rather than result. An ideology of equality of opportunity lends itself to a social system based on "meritocracy," or the belief that because the race for social rewards is fair, those who reach the finish line must be faster and thus more meritorious runners than those who came in last. This is a "natural" sorting process of who gets to be wealthy and powerful (Lewontin, 1992).

Not only does this view support the status quo of a few haves and many have-nots, but it creates a commonsense notion about difference, inferring that those without power cannot and will never acquire power because of their own innate deficiencies (inability to run fast). Lewontin argues that this "ideology of biological determinism" states that humans differ in fundamental abilities because of innate differences that are biologically inherited. Such biological principles are "meant to convince us that although we may not live in the best of all *conceivable* worlds, we live in the best of all *possible* worlds" (Lewontin, 1992, p. 21).

Measures of ability and intelligence have their root not in the tradition of scientific inquiry (as we often believe), but in the formation of this ideology of biological determinism, which guarantees the creation of a stratified society (haves and have-nots) and the legitimation of that stratification process. Definitions and understandings of intelligence, like all meanings, are sensitive to the cultural contexts in which they are constructed. In culturally diverse societies, the meanings that tend to dominate are those constructed by the actors with the most power within the social structure. Because of the political, economic, and social power of these actors, their world view is rarely challenged and their culturally based definition of intelligence becomes "common sense." In this way, the socially constructed, culturally embedded meaning of intelligence becomes an ideology (Mannheim, 1936).

Accordingly, the ideology of intelligence is enlisted to make the particular cultural capital (or ways of knowing) of the white and wealthy seem not only more valuable than others, but also the marker of biologically determined ability. This definition of intelligence is reified in the form of standardized tests that measure students' acquisition of this particular cultural capital. This measurement of "ability" provides students from white and wealthy families with considerable advantage, but under the guise of their "natural" abilities, not as a function of their social location (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979).

INTELLIGENCE: THE HISTORY OF AN IDEOLOGY

Early in the twentieth century, American psychologists eagerly embraced Alfred Binet's (1913) "scientific" IQ tests as a more valid and reliable way to assess intelligence than earlier methods that relied on measuring head sizes and body types. Because the specific abilities that IQ tests measure are highly interrelated statistically—that is, the knowledge, speed, and accuracy required to successfully complete test items—British psychologist Charles Spearman conceptualized intelligence as a single, general attribute or entity (Spearman's g) that underlies all mental abilities (Spearman, 1904). The work of H. H. Goddard (1914), Lewis Terman (1916), and Robert Yerkes (1915) early in the century created standardized intelligence measures and scales that matched their belief that intelligence is innate, stable, and inherited. IQ tests administered to World War I army recruits and immigrants entering at Ellis Island proved to be a useful and socially important way to rank and sort individuals in terms of their perceived mental capacities.

From the inception of large-scale intelligence testing, psychologists found persistent racial group differences on IQ tests. Early intelligence test

pioneers framed these measured differences as reflective of inherent biological differences among racial groups. Because intelligence was conceptualized as innate and hereditary, judgments about the moral character of various groups followed from their IQ scores. The views of Lewis M. Terman (1916) are bluntly illustrative:

> M. P. ["Boy, IQ 77"] represent[s] the level of intelligence which is very, very, common among Spanish-Indian and Mexican families of the Southwest and also among Negroes. Their dullness seems to be racial, or at least inherent in the family stocks from which they come. The fact that one meets this type with such extraordinary frequency among Indians, Mexicans, and Negroes suggests . . . enormously significant racial differences in general intelligence, differences which cannot be wiped out by any scheme of mental culture. Children of this group should be segregated in special classes and be given instruction which is concrete and practical. (pp. 91–92)

Some theorists go so far as to argue that the primary purpose of the early study of hereditary and biological intelligence, including craniology and craniometry, was to legitimize otherwise morally indefensible political and economic institutions such as slavery and colonialism (Gould, 1981). "Scientific" evidence proving that Africans, in particular, were feeble-minded by nature was essential to the ideology of biological determinism and helped to "rationalize" the inhuman actions of white Europeans and Americans. Obviously, the legacy of these institutions and the belief on which they stood are still with us today.

Some turn-of-the-century psychologists extended the concept of intelligence to include a wide range of human behaviors; in particular, undesirable social behaviors such as criminality were thought to reflect mental deficiency. Through this lens, human behavior was "decontextualized" from the unequal conditions of society and seen as predetermined and innate—for example, the "violent" gene. The bald sentiments of intelligence testing pioneer Lewis M. Terman, after nearly a century, are worth citing to reveal this side of our normative "heritage." He noted, for instance, that while not all criminals are feeble-minded, "all feeble-minded are at least potential criminals." He also wrote that hardly anyone would dispute that "every feeble-minded woman is a potential prostitute" (Terman, 1916, p. 11). Terman's link between intelligence and particular kinds of human behavior has proved to be an enduring theme in the ideology of intelligence.

By the middle of the twentieth century, straightforward biological or genetic explanations of intelligence had been opposed by researchers who argued that they were based on shaky empirical ground (Gould, 1981).

Furthermore, with the rise of the civil rights movement and the beginning of the War on Poverty, genetic explanations of intelligence became somewhat less acceptable, although such beliefs are still very much with us and may be gaining more ground with the recent publication of *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994).

Still, in the 1960s, education was increasingly seen as the solution to poverty, and thus arguments that intelligence was fixed became less popular in the public policy arena than arguments that intelligence is related to environment. Many liberals came to believe that the reason poor and black students were not achieving in school was because of the impoverished cultural environment in which they were being reared (Banfield, 1970; Lewis, 1968). Inherent in these culture-of-poverty arguments are understandings of intelligence that is culturally specific, and thus certain forms of behavior and style of life have been, consciously and unconsciously, equated with academic ability. In this way, a new ideology of intelligence emerged.

CONVENTIONAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF INTELLIGENCE IN DETRACKING SCHOOLS

As the quotations in the sections following reveal, many educators in the schools we studied held conceptions of students' learning ability that were reflective of the intelligence ideology discussed above.[5] They often accounted for students' school performance with references to stable, unidimensional, easily assessable traits that were beyond the ken of the school. They accepted as "normal" the fact that students fell along a predictable range, and many provided racial and/or cultural explanations for differences in students' ability to succeed at school learning. Many held that the ability differences among students were a legitimate basis for educational and social sorting, and thus they were the least likely supporters of detracking reform at their schools.

INTELLIGENCE AS INNATE AND FIXED

Conceptions of learning ability as something inborn, stable, and unlikely to be altered by schooling were clearly evident among the educators we studied:

> Few of [the honors students] have a lot of *native intelligence.* Most of them are good kids—ones who will study without you telling them to.

> They try to put onto everybody else their *deficiencies that are coming from inside of them.*

> He's a bright, achieving kid, but he's not *truly gifted.*

> Once GT [gifted and talented], always GT. You don't become "ungifted" just because something happens in your life.
>
> The school works best for those kids in the upper quartile who have the work ethic, and are not just *innately bright* and lazy.
>
> Some kids have got it and some kids don't.

INTELLIGENCE AS UNIDIMENSIONAL

Also reflective of traditional conceptions of intelligence was the way in which some teachers saw students' ability along a single dimension. Most common was the tendency to equate intelligence with the *speed* at which students are able to accomplish school-like tasks. In all of the schools we studied, gifted students were contrasted with those "who don't get things quickly." Educators with more conventional understandings of intelligence often described students' ability to work quickly (as a proxy for intelligence) as distributed along a normal, bell-shaped curve, with those at the low-scoring end of the curve commonly referred to as "the slow end."

INTELLIGENCE AS EASILY ASSESSED

In addition to equating intelligence with speed, a number of teachers commented that students' intelligence was highly visible or *readily apparent*, and they noted with a high degree of confidence and certainty that teachers (and other students) can easily assess it.

> I could have a kid in class for a week and talk with them two or three times, give them one written assignment, and tell you within a few points what their IQ is. You know intuitively when a person is smart and when they're not.
>
> I can tell within four days what level kids are at.
>
> Everyone knows who the gifted are.

THE BELL CURVE AS "NORMAL"

A number of teachers reiterated the conventional view that ability distributed along a bell curve is the "natural" order of things:

> . . . a normal bell curve. Most students are one standard deviation away from the mean. I believe that is, indeed, how ability or intelligence or however you want to state it falls.

> [lamenting the school's bimodal distribution of achievement] The school . . . has made little progress toward a bell-shaped curve even after all the desegregation money.
>
> You know, the end of the bell curve . . .

RACIAL AND CULTURAL EXPLANATIONS

Beliefs that ability overlaps with race are salient in the schools. Many minority teachers worried that white teachers think that students of color are not as bright as whites. While these beliefs may often be "subliminal" rather than overt, some white teachers openly expressed such views:

> We're getting fewer honors kids, and that's just demographics.
>
> In terms of the percentage of academically capable kids—whatever that means . . . that's a sweeping term that needs defining—the percentage of African-American students versus the percentage of white students is very disproportionate.
>
> They [Native American students] don't have the support at home, and they don't have the ability.
>
> [Regarding the need for vocational education] for kids from low-income and ethnic families . . . not all kids are meant to go to school.

We found also that many teachers' conceptions of ability at detracking schools include a broad profile of culturally specific classroom behaviors or social deportment. Put bluntly, children who behaved in a manner that teachers approved of seemed to benefit from this broadened definition of ability.

> Smart students . . . look like they're paying attention, turn in their homework, help classmates who don't understand something, and are good leaders.
>
> A lot of really smart kids are rote. They want to sit there and take notes and not be creative. Smart is taking notes and taking a test and getting a good grade.
>
> When it comes to . . . my honors level, it's the most amazing thing because you've got these truly gifted children who are sitting there . . . raised hands, no commotion.
>
> The bright child is too achievement oriented, and the slow child is not enough achievement oriented.

Many explanations of intelligence grounded in culture or social deportment inevitably break down along racial lines to the point that African-

American, Latino, and Native-American students must literally "act white" in order to be perceived as intelligent by many of their teachers. Some educators in the schools we studied employ very race-specific understandings of culture as it relates to academic ability. In particular, Native-American children are perceived to be disadvantaged because they are too reserved; African-American children are perceived to disadvantage themselves because they are too forward. But rarely, if ever, is the culturally based standard against which students are measured questioned.

> [Regarding African-American students' avoidance of] asking questions, raising their hands, and waiting for answers. . . . If it's not their age, then it's certainly their culture where they're able to express themselves verbally at any and all times.

> Let's face it, most Native kids are not highly verbal children. Their values are not competitive. They're not trying to get to the top of the pack. They're not trying to be noticed. It doesn't make sense to shove them into this [gifted] program and say, "Now we're meeting their needs." I'm really bothered by that.

> [Regarding why identifying intelligence of Native-American minority students is difficult] because they are not verbally inclined [and testing] "shuts them down." [Evaluation is based on a] Western way of thinking.

> [Regarding the low test scores of African-American students]. Personally, I believe that's a . . . that's a cultural situation . . . there's just a lot of things that they're . . . that they're deprived of, not because anyone is trying to deprive them, but because of their situation that they're born into.

INTELLIGENCE IDEOLOGY RATIONALIZING EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL SORTING

Much of teachers' resistance to detracking appears to stem from their belief that intelligence is so fundamental to students' school success and social futures that they could not create heterogeneous learning environments in which all students could benefit. Thus, this conventional understanding of intelligence lends itself to the process of ranking and sorting individuals, and for providing quite different opportunities to different groups.

> But that's really been a problem as far as the grouping. . . . You know it looks good on paper. . . . It works pretty well if they're not too far apart, but there's some place there if the range gets too large, it doesn't work any more.

> These bright kids are going to be in white-collar jobs, and they're going to have these so-called lower end kids as their employees.

For many who saw intelligence as constituting such profound educational and social differences among students, detracking not only seemed illogical; it seemed damaging to the more intelligent students. Some argued that the reform jeopardized the educational opportunities of "top" students in the hope of helping those at the bottom.

> We do everything we can to help the low end of the scale. Why do we always want to punish the top end of the scale? I think everything should be done in the world for those kids to push them on, to stretch them. And that's what I plan to do.

It is not difficult to understand, given the history of intelligence and the voices of these educators, how tracking has become a systematic form of racial segregation within schools. Moreover, it is not surprising that those who teach in racially mixed schools and who hold these more conventional conceptions of ability as innate, fixed, unidimensional, and easy to measure are generally resistant to detracking reforms.

NEWER CONSTRUCTIONS OF INTELLIGENCE

In recent years, cognitive and developmental psychologists have refined theories that support alternative constructions of intelligence and learning and challenge the prevailing ideology of intelligence. Such constructions emphasize intelligence as multidimensional, as contrasted with the traditional view of general intelligence as a single entity. These psychologists, like many culture-of-poverty theorists, stress that intelligence is developmental—that is, acquired as a product of experiences and social interactions over time, and alterable in social institutions such as school (Gardner, 1983a, 1983b, 1988; Sternberg, 1986)—in contrast with the view that it is inherited or the result of very early stimulation alone. Yet in this recent work, common patterns of cognitive development across individuals are more helpful for understanding learning than are individual and group differences espoused by those who hold traditional and fixed biological or cultural conceptions of intelligence. So too are the deep structures of cognitive processes more helpful for understanding and promoting learning than are more superficial variations across cultural groups in how these processes are displayed.

This new work views learning as unlimited, as opposed to the view that individuals' predetermined capacity—based on the testing of isolated skills—caps the extent of their development. Very recent thinking, in fact, suggests the possibility that children experience developmental "waves" of multiple, overlapping cognitive strategies of varying degrees of sophistica-

tion rather than discrete developmental stages of ability (Siegler, 1995). This hypothesis also suggests that the same child might simultaneously use cognitive strategies that are judged by adults as "smart" and "not smart."

Furthermore, some of these theories are now being written about and discussed in the popular press and by education scholars outside the field of psychology. Much of this interest has been spurred by the 1994 publication of Herrnstein and Murray's *The Bell Curve* and the considerable public response to it. Partially as a result of this discussion, more multidimensional and thus multicultural "ways of knowing" are gaining recognition and broader understanding. In his paper "Myths, Countermyths, and Truths about Intelligence," for example, Robert Sternberg (1996) presents a list of ideas about intelligence that illuminates for nonpsychologist education researchers how newer theories are quite at odds with traditional ones positing a hierarchical (if "normal") distribution of intelligence measured as a single dimensional entity.

Not surprisingly, the concept of genius, "superior ability," or giftedness has also shifted considerably with these new perspectives on intelligence. Sternberg and Davidson (1986) claim, for example, that "giftedness is something we invent, not something we discover" (p. 4). And considerably more attention has been focused on contrasting experts and novices, rather than geniuses and morons. This shift highlights the newer cultural emphasis on the alterability of human capacity with development and learning. If "giftedness" is socially constructed, then culture, or the highly subjective ways in which people make meaning of the world around them, must play a significant role in that construction. Recognition of the subjectivity of intelligence should help educators deconstruct the cultural hierarchies—with some cultural understandings highly valued and other completely devalued—that dictate whose knowledge is rewarded in the educational system.

A MIX OF OLD AND NEWER CONSTRUCTIONS IN DETRACKING SCHOOLS

Even as scholars begin to deconstruct old definitions and create new theories of intelligence, many people in our society, including educators, hang on to earlier understandings. In fact, while many of the teachers in the detracking schools we studied have broadened their understanding beyond the simple definition of intelligence as an IQ score, they still fall back on a narrower and more traditional concept of ability as something that is fixed. Thus, considerable ambiguity and confusion about the nature of intelligence permeate the culture of these schools, revealed both by disagreement among educators and by internal contradictions within the views of individual educators.

GRAPPLING WITH NEWER THEORIES

Most educators in detracking schools who have attempted to assimilate new meanings of intelligence have done so in an incomplete and somewhat superficial manner. Many who were eager to move away from the traditional intelligence ideology spoke vaguely about multidimensional and developmental conceptions of ability; perhaps these ideas have been popularized by staff developers who themselves may have only a shallow understanding of the implications of multiple intelligence theory as "learning styles" and "modalities." The following types of statements were quite common among some of the teachers at the ten schools who were wrestling with these theories:

> There's so many different learning styles. . . . I have a lot of honors kids that are frustrated with inferential reasoning because they like one right answer. Math people like one right answer . . . it's just different kinds of thinking.

> [Speaking of moving away from seeing students as "highs" or "lows."] Students are different and exhibit a variety of levels, styles, directions . . . in thinking, in the way information is absorbed, delivered by students, and students' responses.

> [Some students] have a particular talent . . . in terms of just being able to work through a situation from a commonsense standpoint, a realistic standpoint, a real world situation, . . . kids who have talent in speaking . . . in how they conduct themselves with their peers, their leadership roles.

> Being smart is being a good leader, sometimes physically fit and enthusiastic. There is interpersonally smart, physically smart, commonsense smart. . . . Students can be smart in different ways, including the smart that schools traditionally test.

> I may have to do an illustration on the chalkboard, trying to reach all the students that I have in my class, but with the honor roll students, sometimes I just use one type of illustration.

> Everybody is gifted in their own way.

THE PERSISTENCE OF RANKING AND SORTING

For many educators, moving away from a reliance on traditional intelligence seems not to have diminished the tendency to judge and rank, by whatever criteria, "smart" and "not smart" children. Some teachers suggest, for example, that multiple intelligences are distributed in much the same way as traditional IQ. Others have developed more elaborate classifications of students' ability.

Different kids learn in different ways and at different rates . . . even my *bright* kids.

[Explaining that there's more than one "bell curve" that students abilities fall along.] It's different for each curriculum content. . . . We have varying degrees of talent in each area of the curriculum.

Honors is a slice of intelligence. When you talk about intelligence, it's that big picture. Some of those kids who would have been in Basic are really in Honors in this area of intelligence.

[Explaining "brain modalities" to parents of low-achieving children.] This is how your child learns. . . . Your child is right-brained.

Some kids can be straight-A students, but if they're concrete learners, that's not always viewed as high ability.

Kids who are visual learners and oral learners can both pick up from this [notes on the chalkboard]. I also use colored chalk all the time, and that really gets to some kids . . . because I have a lot of either low level or average kids in my classes that are mixed. They've almost all responded, "Oh, I love that color" or "Cool design."

Right-brained people learn from whole to part, and everyone else—left-brained—learns from the part to the whole, that goes with what I was saying about the honors kid.

REINTERPRETING RACIAL AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AS "STYLE"

We found educators in all ten schools who use the construct of the multidimensional nature of intelligence to explain and dignify racial and cultural differences in students' academic performance and school behavior. At many of the schools, explicit efforts had been made to help faculty acquire knowledge of how racial and cultural differences that are sometimes "mistaken" for low intelligence actually reflect different "learning styles." Some brought in "experts" on these topics to conduct professional development to assist with their detracking efforts. The impact of these efforts was clear in many teachers' discussions of race and ability.

[It is important to encourage the] many different learning styles [because] different kids learn in different ways and at different rates. [However] an honors kid is put off by the loud kid, and often equates them with a nonproductive kid [even though some of the] loudest kids are B and A students. That's the way they learn. It's a cultural thing.

> We're not just dealing with modalities, we're dealing with culture. How children learn. . . . So, we are trying to deal with both. . . . Often we have people say, "We have African-American children, they are higher context, they talk more, they're busier." Most white Americans are generally more low context. So, if you're a low-context person and you've got a high-context person sitting in your class, you've got to adapt some—the same as I had to adapt to my low-context students.

Teachers' efforts to reconceptualize intelligence in ways that would allow them to expect that all students could learn, and prompt them to teach in ways that, in the words of one teacher, would allow students to "find the genius within them," were characteristic of the detracking advocates in the schools. Some of these teachers were further along in this process than others. However, the tentativeness of these new conceptions, the widespread tendency to accommodate (or even conflate) both conventional and unconventional views, and in many cases the broad misinterpretations of newer theories of intelligence made it extraordinarily difficult for reform-minded teachers to sustain the effort and commitment needed to deconstruct more powerful ideologies of intelligence that support tracking and ability-grouping structures, particularly when parents and others used the conventional ideologies to support the racial and cultural politics in local communities.

CULTURAL POLITICS AROUND INTELLIGENCE AND TRACKING

Educators do not live and work in a social vacuum. Their beliefs and understandings about intelligence and the ability of their students reflect in many ways the "commonsense" views of the society in general, and the dominant view in their community more specifically. Within a particular school community, certain voices are louder and more powerful than others, which means that some members of a given school community, particularly powerful parents, are better able to shape the meaning of ability than others. We found in our ten schools that parents of high-track students, who are more often than not white and relatively wealthy compared with others in their communities, benefit in significant ways when educators maintain more conventional views of intelligence (Wells & Serna, 1996). Because the cultural bias inherent in more traditional views is strongly skewed in their favor and because the track structure is built on those views, these powerful parents generally denounce detracking reform efforts and the more recent, multidimensional conceptions of intelligence on which they are based.

The more conventional and culturally and racially specific views of intelligence we heard from many teachers were echoed in the voices of parents

and community members we interviewed at each of the ten schools. Thus, parental resistance to detracking reforms in these schools is often not about curriculum or instructional strategies but about whose culture and style of life is valued knowledge, and thus whose way of knowing is equated with "intelligence." In racially diverse schools, these cultural battles over the meaning of intelligence are often played out along race and social class lines because elite parents have internalized dominant, but often unspoken, beliefs about race, culture, and intelligence. In this way, race consistently plays a central, if not explicit, role in the resistance of powerful elite parents to detracking reform. Their ideology of merit and of deserving high-track students is often cloaked in symbolic politics that have clear racial implications. For example, these parents say they like the concept of a racially mixed school or classroom, as long as the African-American or Latino students act like white and middle-class children and their parents are involved in the school and buy in to the American Dream. This argument relates to the behavioral view of intelligence held by many educators.

The American Dream construction of the "deserving minority" also denies the value of nonwhite students' and parents' own culture or of their sometimes penetrating critique of the American creed (see Yonezawa, Williams, & Hirshberg, 1995). Only those students with the cultural capital and the ideology that supports it deserve to be rewarded in the educational system. Yet because the political arguments put forth by these powerful parents sound so benign, so "American," the cultural racism that guides their perspective is rarely exposed and thus the racial segregation within the schools is seen as natural.

For example, at Central High—a mostly Latino school on the West Coast with a 23 percent white student body—the local elite consists of a relatively small, mostly white middle class. The majority of Latino students come from very low-income families; many are recent immigrants to the United States. A white parent whose sons are taking honors classes explained her opposition to detracking efforts at Central, exposing her sense of entitlement this way:

> I think a lot of those Latinos come and they're still Mexicans at heart. They're not American. I don't care what color you are, we're in America here and we're going for this country. And I think their heart is in Mexico, and they're with that culture still. It's one thing to come over and bring your culture and to use it, but it's another thing to get into that . . . and I'm calling it the American ethic. They're not into it and that's why they end up so far behind. They get in school, and they are behind. That's one thing that irks my husband a lot is that we have to bring down the standards because that's where they're at. And that's

> what we were afraid . . . that the AP kids, that their education would be diluted because those kids just weren't up to where they're at.

For the most part, however, these powerful parents' resistance to detracking is cloaked in extremely rational and self-interested language about the quality of education their children will receive in tracked versus detracked classes. Yet these arguments are made even when reform-minded educators provide evidence that the curriculum and instruction in heterogeneous classes can be such that all students are challenged. While these political battles between parents and educators are publicly fought over which students—those labeled gifted under a more conventional conception of intelligence or those who are considered less than gifted by these standards—will have access to which curriculum and which teachers, the philosophical underpinnings of these debates are far more profound. At risk for the parents of high-track and gifted-labeled students is the entire system of meritocracy on which their privileged positions in society are based. The legitimation of inequality is called into question. As this system begins to crack with each effort on the part of educators to reconceptualize knowledge, ability, merit, and intelligence, these parents will, and understandably so, grasp at any rationale to support their commonsense understanding of what is fair. Such struggles, Bourdieu asserts, are not merely material conflicts over the distribution of social wealth, but are cultural conflicts between styles of life (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Harrison, 1993).

For instance, at one of the high schools in our study, the English teacher who created a heterogeneous American Studies class conducted some research on intelligence and decided that our society and educational system do not really understand what intelligence is or how to measure it. When the principal asked her to present her research to parents at an open house, her message was not well received, particularly by those parents whose children were in the advanced placement (AP) classes. According to the English teacher, "if you were raised under the system that said you were very intelligent and high achieving, you don't want anyone questioning that system, ok? That's just the way it is." She said that actually what some of the parents were most threatened by was how this research on intelligence was going to be used as part of the reform effort at the school.

A "gifted education" teacher at one of the middle schools in our study was severely criticized by parents of identified "gifted" students for not offering their children separate enrichment classes that were not available to other students. Instead the teacher had opted to offer extra "challenge" courses, which both gifted and "nongifted" students could choose to take. What upset this teacher most about the parents' anger was that it seemed to be based on whether their children were being singled out and treated

differently and not on the content of the curriculum to which the children were being exposed:

> And they didn't ask, "Well what are our kids learning in your classes?" Nobody asked that. I just found that real dismaying, and I was prepared to tell them what we do in class, and here's an example. I had course outlines. I send objectives home with every class and goals and work requirements, and nobody asked me anything about that . . . to me it's like I'm dealing with their egos, more than what their kids really need educationally.

Similar examples, at other schools in our study, of powerful parents putting "manner over matter" or "form over function," as Bourdieu (1984) would explain it, lead us to question the instrumental "rationality" of the powerful parents' resistance to detracking. In fact, oftentimes we found the pedagogy in detracked classes far more creative and engaging than that in more traditional classes in which teachers basically lecture at the students and then test them on specific information.

Despite these curricular or pedagogical issues, efforts to alter within-school racial segregation via detracking are usually extremely threatening to elites and their position at the top of the hierarchy. The perceived stakes, from an elite parent's perspective, are quite high. And while these stakes are most frequently discussed in rational, academic terms—for example, the dumbing down of the curriculum for the smart students—the real stakes, we argue, are generally not academic at all.

Because traditional hierarchical track structures in schools have been validated, as they have so often, by the conflation of culture and intelligence, efforts to detrack schools will necessarily confront established culturally based "truths" about ability and merit. When the ideology of merit—of "deserving" high-track students—is challenged by educators who accept newer, less conventional views of intelligence and thus find that the rigid track structures no longer make sense, powerful parents must employ practices that make detracking reform politically impossible.

We have identified four prevalent practices[4] in the ten schools we studied:

1. *Threatening Flight*—In situations where local elite parents have several other viable public or private school options, the direct or indirect threat of elite flight can thwart detracking efforts.
2. *Co-opting the Institutional Elites*—When confronted with the threat of flight and the fear it creates in the hearts of educators, the "institutional elites"—that is, educators with power and authority within the educational system—are co-opted by the ideology of the local elites. We find that these institutional elites often see their roles as serving the needs and demands of the local elites. Indeed, in most situa-

tions, their professional success and even job security depend on their ability to play these roles.

3. *Buy-in of the Not-quite-elite Parents*—Often the ideology of the local elite's entitlement is pervasive and powerful enough that the elites do not necessarily have to be directly involved in the decision-making processes at schools. Between the threats to flee, the ability to co-opt many of the institutional elites, and the ideology of their privilege as "common sense," greater parent involvement on the part of the not-quite-elite parents via more democratic school-site councils and the like will not necessarily change the power structure (Beare, 1993). This is what Gramsci would refer to as the "consensual" basis of power or the consensual side of politics in a civil society (see Boggs, 1984; Gramsci, 1971).
4. *Detracking Bribes*—Powerful parents use their symbolic capital to bribe the schools to give them some preferential treatment—for example, much smaller class sizes or the best teachers in the school—in return for their willingness to allow some small degree of detracking to take place. These detracking bribes tend to make detracking reforms very expensive and impossible to implement in a comprehensive fashion.

EDUCATORS' CONCEPTIONS AND LOCAL POLITICS—A POWERFUL COMBINATION

At the intersection of teachers' beliefs about intelligence and the political practices of parents in the local community we found consensus, co-optation, compromise, and conflict. For instance, we found that teachers holding conventional conceptions of ability pose the greatest threat to the implementation of detracking in part because they resist changes within the schools and in part because they seek political support for their cause among parents who want to maintain their children's place of privilege in school structured around inequality. Thus the school-based ideology of intelligence spills over to fuel the cultural politics of racially mixed communities and vice versa. But even when teachers have adopted new views of intelligence (however tentatively) and support detracking reforms, their efforts are shaped by what community elites will tolerate. In this way, the normative and political dimensions of detracking reforms are not only linked but mutually supportive.

In the previous section, we highlighted some of the political practices employed by powerful elite parents. In what follows, we describe how these political practices play themselves out as educators who have deconstructed traditional definitions of intelligence struggle to implement alter-

natives to tracking in the face of countervailing political forces. We have found it helpful to think about prevailing social constructions of ability, which are cultural-ideological, as operating in a reflexive relationship with school and social structures and with the actions of teachers and parents. By reflexive, we mean that they are mutually influencing, as opposed to one being determined by the other. That is, while educators may be active agents in shaping the reform efforts going on at their schools, their agency is involved in an interplay with actions of others and thus the structure and culture—at the local and the societal level—of which they are a part.[5] This larger context may both constrain and enable educators' actions (Datnow, 1995).

As Mehan (1992) has noted, cultural constructs—norms and ideologies—are not simply products of social structures over which individuals have no control.[6] Neither are structures merely a result of unfettered individual actors making rational decisions about how to organize social life. Rather, social facts, such as intelligence, represent how people actively make sense of social life, and these conceptions are salient as educators decide how to organize teaching and learning at school.

CULTURAL POLITICS EMPOWER RESISTANT EDUCATORS

A fierce political battle over the creation of a "custom calendar" at Central High School illustrates how this dynamic plays itself out in relation to the social construction of intelligence and resistance to detracking reform. Reform-minded teachers at Central who had deconstructed the notion that speed in learning is a proxy for intelligence advocated a new school calendar to complement the move toward detracking. As one teacher explained:

> The paradigm here is that it takes every student in California 180 days to learn algebra 1, and my question is, how valid could that be? Aren't there some students who might need a couple more days to do that? Now is it better to tell that student that they're a failure and can't learn, because they can't learn it in 180 days, or is it better to give them a few extra days to do it?

The calendar would have provided additional "intersession" days to allow lower-achieving students to make up work or get ahead. Despite support for the new calendar from a strong majority of the teachers, it was the cultural and political forces behind the minority of teachers who voted against it that ultimately won out when the school board voted against the calendar. These forces were marshaled through the actions of one particular teacher who rallied white, affluent parents against the custom calendar, touting what he believed to be its harmful effects, including increasing gang violence in the community when students were on their intersession breaks.

An assistant principal and long-time community resident noted that the custom calendar, although not intended as a redistributive policy, was seen as a symbol of policymaking aimed at helping students traditionally disadvantaged by the system and taking from those who benefit from the status quo. He felt the custom calendar was used as a symbol of a liberal ideology, an example of a larger movement to take away from the haves and give to the have-nots. Thus it was explicitly connected to parents' nonrational or culturally and symbolically based motives to maintain the traditional school structure and the conception of intelligence—for example, speed—that structure supports.

The failure of the custom calendar, which was seen by those with power as favoring those without it, is consistent with Apple's (1982) argument that schools help create the conditions necessary for the maintenance of ideological hegemony, the continued dominance of a particular set of values and norms supported by the policies of the local governing bodies. Similarly, Boyd (1976) found that superintendents and local school boards make policies in accordance with what they perceive as the predominant community values and expectations. Through their actions, the school board at Central reinforced the pro-tracking, racially biased ideology of intelligence and merit that is shared by the powerful affluent parents in the community.

The custom-calendar issue also provides a potent example of how educators interact with the larger structure and culture in which the school is embedded, particularly in their efforts to thwart reforms that challenge a prevailing ideology. Such interactions empower otherwise disempowered teachers when a powerful constituency of parents or community members support those educators who resist reform. The defeat of the custom calendar can be viewed as a case in which the culture (and political power) of affluent parents supported those teachers who held conventional views of intelligence and ability, and constrained the agency of teachers who wanted their school structure to acknowledge that such views are indefensible.

The reform-minded educators at Central High School faced a similar barrier when attempting to bring about detracking on a departmental level through the implementation of an integrated math curriculum. A math teacher explained her feelings about the program in which students are heterogeneously grouped: "Interactive math is good for a wide range of students. . . . I truly believe that Interactive Math will allow the honors kids that want to [excel] . . . to do so."

While four teachers teach integrated math, the traditional sequence still exists alongside this program, a compromise necessary to quell resistance from more traditional teachers. These teachers' cause to maintain the traditional math sequence, which includes an honors track, is bolstered by

the support of parents of college prep and honors students who have fought to keep the traditional math sequence in place. Despite the assurance by integrated math program teachers that universities have approved the innovative program, these parents argued for separate classes for their children on the basis that universities favor the traditional math sequence. An educator at the school explained:

> Parents of the honors kids want things status quo. They want their kids in honors. They want it to look like it always worked. They don't want them in integrated math. They don't want them in anything different. They want it to look exactly like it looked twenty years ago when they did it. And they get very demanding about that. And that's something that we'll have to tackle. But it will be an out and out fight.

The efforts on the part of these parents to maintain honors classes reflect their decision (although often not conscious) to maintain the current social structure, in which people are stratified in terms of race and class. This hierarchical macro structure is supported by conventional conceptions of intelligence.

As these examples illustrate, we see patterns that reveal a reflexive relationship in the day-to-day life in detracking schools among culturally based ideologies about intelligence and learning; structural factors such as school schedules, grouping practices, grading systems, and so forth; and the political agency of educators and students to act on their beliefs to sustain or change the structures.

NEW CONCEPTIONS AS POLITICAL WEDGES

As we have illustrated, newer, more democratic conceptions of intelligence and the ideal of detracking that follows from these conceptions compete with traditional beliefs about intelligence and a schooling structure that, for the better part of a century, has accommodated a hierarchical, "mass production" system. This competition is deeply entwined within the cultural stratification and the struggle for advantage in local communities. To the extent that cultural and political issues are unsettled or contested in the larger society, these conceptual ambiguities and political struggles are reflected inside the ten schools we studied and, most likely, in every school across the country. They will, more often than not, work against educators' efforts to detrack.

Yet we found in each of our schools some highly committed teachers and administrators who were able to use new conceptions of intelligence to bolster their efforts to interrupt patterns of race- and social-class privilege in schools. These visionary educators deconstructed the ideology that

assures the privileged place of some students over others, and they committed themselves to creating new structures and practices based on still-contentious nonhierarchical views of intelligence. They engaged in normative and political struggles to develop flat opportunity structures (mixed-ability classes and a common curriculum) within an institution and a society still characterized by differentiated and hierarchical structures. In short, they expected to disrupt a rather smooth cultural fit of conventional beliefs about intelligence and tracking structures, and their interactions with students. Two types of circumstances seemed to spur these reformers forward. One was their use of powerful firsthand experiences with children to bolster their more abstract ideas about the nature of ability. A second was their sympathetic and politically savvy work with parents to create a safe space where a dialogue about their experiences could take place.

Firsthand Experiences

Terri Jamison provides just one of several examples in our schools of teachers whose firsthand experiences—either personal or professional—challenged conceptions of ability and provided the impetus for reform. Jamison tells of how the experience of having her own daughter placed into the low track first led her to question the ideology of intelligence and tracking:

> You know you give them a test, they're all between here and here, great. You know exactly where to go, but it's not fair to the kids. In my opinion, it's not fair to the kids. My daughter was placed in a homogeneous grouping. She was stuck at the low end, in the lowest math class in the school. She is a bright little girl, but she's a divergent thinker so she doesn't focus. . . . So I have a real thing about it, because I have a bright little girl who would have been in the toilet, and I can see how destructive homogeneous grouping is. That's why I don't like it, because I saw it in action. And I had to fight, I mean fight hard, to keep my kid from believing what she was being taught in school, which was that she is incapable of doing math. And now this is the kid who wants to be an astrophysicist!

Because she was able to juxtapose her own "smart" daughter's experiences against the ideology of intelligence, Jamison became a strong advocate for heterogeneous grouping and designed new structures at her school to accommodate other "smart" children—including the school's considerable population of Latino students—who diverge from that ideology.

Other teachers found that their work with heterogeneous groups in classrooms had profound effects on their conceptions of intelligence and their dispositions about tracking. One teacher told us that she has learned

over the years not to label students smart or dumb because they often end up surprising her:

> You get a lot of kids that may not . . . do well on a test, but you can tell they reason well, they think very quickly . . . and you know, I've learned . . . I mean let's face it, you know kids can go through high school and make Cs and then go to college and make straight As, so I don't do a lot of labeling.

Like this teacher, others changed their conceptions of ability after realizing that a change in curricular and instructional strategies could create an environment in which all students could be "smart." One teacher told us, "Heterogeneous grouping has made teachers think differently about all kids; they see more potential." Another told us, "The program has done amazing things for standard track kids because all of a sudden somebody says 'You can do this!' "

Olivia Jeffers, a senior high English teacher at a desegregated southern high school, developed an interdisciplinary course that she team-teaches with a teacher in social studies. The class attracts high- and low-track, white and black students who can choose the class to help satisfy college-entrance English requirements. Jeffers, in her interview with us, argued that this kind of heterogeneous grouping is essential to the learning process, and because she individualizes the curriculum for each student—letting them choose much of their own reading and work on research projects at their own pace—she does not feel that she is holding the high-achieving students back by having them in the same room with low-achieving students. In fact, she sees it as quite the opposite. She described the benefit of the detracked classroom for one of her high-achieving white students from a very wealthy suburban family:

> In class, when I have a discussion and she makes a statement, everybody else hears it, and we talk about it. She gets to pontificate, she gets to make a statement about something very important. She also gets insight from somebody who hasn't had her experience, or doesn't own a horse, or a place out in the country. A kid who gets on the bus everyday, and lives in two rooms. So when she defines self-reliance [the topic of recent class discussion on Emerson] . . . it's from the perspective of the kid who has it—who has a family that has given it to her and the financial security to maintain it. But she's got to hear from a kid who's had to struggle his little buns or her little buns to get it. Now if that is not a learning experience, I don't know what is.

With independent student learning coupled with dynamic class discussions among students of very different backgrounds and academic strengths, Jef-

fers has created a learning environment in which she sees more students develop, as she explains it, insight into their own ways of knowing and learning. And when they do that, they become highly motivated "students" in the broader sense of the word, thirsty for a greater understanding of the world around them.

Work with Parents

Some educators in our study also attempted to deal with countervailing political forces by convincing parents of white, high-achieving students that their children do not lose out in a detracked school because the school offers an enriched curriculum to all. These educators did not merely dismiss these parents as unthinking ideologues. They realized that there are very practical benefits for white and wealthy families in tracked schools—such as the currency that "honors" status has in college admissions. They respected these parents' concerns about the loss of these advantages, and attempted to engage and reassure them about reform.

For example, Sandi Wright, English teacher at Grant High School, led the formation of a parent advisory group to guide their detracking efforts. She invited parents who had expressed concern about tracking and detracking in the past to be members of this group, and then invited other parents to join in order to have a racially mixed group of parents of both high- and low-achieving students. Ms. Wright challenged the parents to become knowledgeable about the issues involved in tracking and detracking so that they could help the department plan its strategy.

> I said, "This is what we need. We need a parent group that is *as aware of* the problem as we are, who sees and knows it as well as we do. We don't need parents who are here to advocate for their student *or* for a group. We need parents who can say, *I'm* here for all students." (Emphasis in original)

Parents observed and compared regular and honors-level classes, and discussed their opinions at the monthly meetings. The advisory group suggested to Wright and her colleagues that if the detracked classes were to be successful, the faculty would have to create a curriculum that challenged everybody. The department listened carefully, and then spent a summer developing a flexible but rigorous curriculum to teach to both regular and honors classes. Detracking proceeded quite smoothly a year later. Politically savvy, Wright used the participation of powerful parents to help reassure others that their children were not being sacrificed by the reform.

In a middle school in our study, educators have attempted to deal with such countervailing political forces by helping parents of white, high-achieving students learn that their children do not lose out in a detracked program. The principal argued:

> To convince the parents of the strong students that heterogeneous grouping is a good idea, you really have to offer them a lot. You need parent education along with a rich program so that parents don't feel that their children are cheated. . . . Parents aren't going to allow academic integration anymore than they voluntarily do racial integration, unless it is something school led. So the school has got to be magnetic in some ways, and this school is.

The principal said she believes that parents are driven by cultural motives, as well as the rational, self-interested estimates of the costs and benefits of detracking. This urban middle school attracts its 50 percent white population by offering a wide variety of special programs and a large amount of resources (many funded by outside grants), all premised on the educational enrichment that is possible with diversity. Most teachers now believe that the only "hassle" with heterogeneous groupings is "educating" the parents, even as the school has implemented interdisciplinary curriculum, team teaching, and flexible scheduling, and almost complete detracking.

CONCLUSION

Our ten schools affirm the proposition that detracking includes far more than simply rearranging instructional grouping patterns in schools in ways that both boost and more evenly distribute learning. Detracking is also a highly normative and political endeavor that confronts deeply held cultural beliefs, ideologies, and fiercely protected arrangements of material and political advantage in local communities.

This normative and political view of reform supported by our detracking analysis suggests clear limitations in conventional approaches to school reform. As illustrated here, a conventional, primarily technical approach to reform runs into severe difficulty on two counts. First, it fails to render problematic commonsense, socially constructed conceptions that lie at the heart of the status quo of schooling, such as intelligence and merit. Second, it fails to account for how such conceptions support and are supported by the politics of culture in local communities that struggle over the distribution of power and privilege. These complex normative and political dynamics help us move beyond the commonplace assumption that resistance to detracking is rational—that its successful implementation hinges on the extent to which reformers demonstrate that low-ability students will learn more and high-ability students will learn just as much as in a tracked school.

Rethinking the meaning of children's capacity and reassessing how schools respond to individual and group differences are prerequisites to

detracking reforms that do not simply replicate in heterogeneous learning environments the current distribution of school expectations, opportunities, and outcomes (Ball, 1981). So, too, is a consideration of how the politics of culture, reflected in parental attitudes about what children need and deserve, plays out in any particular community. Thus, the difficulties faced by schools attempting to detrack may be far better managed by educators and better understood by scholars as a simultaneous process of restructuring, of what Hargreaves (1994) calls "reculturing," and of what we might call "repoliticking."

Notes

1 A few scholars have made the connection between the socially constructed nature of knowledge and intelligence. Perhaps the examples most relevant to our work are found in the studies of Susan Rosenholtz (e.g., Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1984).

2 Our interdisciplinary research team, supported in part by a grant from the Lilly Endowment, used qualitative methods to examine changes in school organization, grouping practices, and classroom pedagogy—what we call the technical aspects of these reforms—in ten schools. We also investigated how the schools tackle well-established school and community norms and political practices that legitimize and support tracking as a "commonsense" approach to educating students. The ten schools in the study varied in size from more than 3,000 to fewer than 500 students. Geographically, they were widely dispersed across the United States with one in the Northeast, three in the Midwest, and one in the South, two in the Northwest, and three in various regions of California. Different schools included significant mixes of white, African-American, Latino, Native American/Alaska Native, and/or Asian students. We visited each of these ten schools three times between 1991 and 1994. Data collection during our site visits consisted of in-depth, semi-structured tape-recorded interviews with administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community leaders, including school board members. We also observed classrooms and faculty, PTA, and school board meetings. We reviewed documents and took field notes about our observations within the schools and the communities. Data have been compiled in extensive single-case studies that form the basis of cross-case analyses. For a full description of this study and its methodology, see Oakes & Wells, 1995. Comprehensive reports of the study's findings have been reported in papers presented at the annual meetings of the AERA and the ASA (see, for example, Oakes, Ray, & Hirshberg, 1995), and in Oakes & Wells, 1996.

3 The data presented here and elsewhere in this article are quotes that capture and illustrate themes throughout the data from the schools. For each category, many more statements underlie our confidence in asserting that what is presented here represents a theme across the schools.

4 A separate paper from this study (Wells & Serna, 1996) examines in more detail these four political practices employed by the powerful "elite" parents of the high-track students in their efforts to thwart detracking reforms.

5 Mehan (1992) argues, "Social actors no longer function as passive role players, shaped exclusively by structural forces beyond their control; they become active sensemakers, choosing among alternatives in often contradictory circumstances" (p. 3).

6 Note here the relevance of other theorists' work on the macro-micro problem in sociology, generally (Giddens, 1984) and, in the sociology of education, especially (Hargreaves, 1994).

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