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An application of the Satisfaction Paradox to Tracking & Attempts at Detracking in American Schools.

[Shepherd Poverty & Human Capabilities Capstone]

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Introduction

Tracking or academic tracking, a sorting practice which occurs globally in developed nations is when students are given different curriculums and segregated into various groups, classes, and schools as they progress through the public school system (LeTendre, 2003:43). Typically tracking is thought to have negative effects on individual student's academic trajectories; tracking in the United States has been defined in various conflicting terms (LeTendre, 2003:43). Some scholars have defined it as a more restrictive tool employed by schools to increase their reproductive role (e.g. passing state standards testing); it establishes set curricula allowing little to no mobility among programs (Lucas 1999, p. 1 as cited in LeTendre, 2003:44). The drawback is that quality of education offered within each track greatly varies often leaving children in the lowest tracks with the poorest quality education.

According to Burris and Welner (2005) academic tracking is "a persistent practice [that] denies a range of opportunities to a large number of students. A disproportionate number of these students are minorities . . .. [This] is one of the underlying reasons [why] the achievement gap has remained so persistent." Tracking typically results in racially and socioeconomically segregated classrooms (Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002:38). Negative effects on academic achievement of low track classes disproportionately affect minority students since they are over-represented in low-tracks and under-represented in high track classrooms, even after previously measured achievement is controlled (Burris & Welner, 2005:595). Socioeconomic status impacts track assignments; highly proficient students from low SES families only have a 50-50 chance of being placed into high-track courses (Burris & Welner, 2005:595). Tracking is biased against lower SES and minorities students in addition. A seemingly obvious response to this problem would be to allow for more flexibility in transferring between tracks, a point addressed later on.

Though tracking was initially established to rectify educational achievement disparities caused by past institutional injustices such as segregation its efforts have been largely unsuccessful. At their best, tracking policies have helped maintain the achievement gaps between minority students, low SES and white students. Having been deemed largely unsuccessful by most scholars, various attempts at detracking programs have been implemented in American schools. Though official policies on tracking in America have been disbanded, underlying cultural and societal barriers unofficially maintain tracking habits. Scholars have credited these barriers as the underlying forces explaining the failure of detracking attempts at getting minority and low SES students to advance out of low and middle tracks into higher educational tracks.

However, I argue that other subtle internal cultural and psychological forces that have not been addressed by detracking efforts are partly attributable to the failure of minority and low SES students to detrack. Proposed here as one of these underlying forces is the satisfaction paradox; a psychological construct that describes a seemingly irrational comfort with one's objectively unsatisfactory state of poverty. I'll attempt to explicate how the cyclical nature of a state of satisfaction in poverty experienced by a child's parents can be replicated and or reinforced within a child who has been low or middle tracked in American schools.

The Satisfaction Paradox

The state of being satisfied with objectively unsatisfactory living conditions such as a poverty-level of living, represents… in the quality of life research a well-being position called the **"satisfaction-paradox***." (Olson & Schober, 1992).*

It is a common myth about people living in poverty in America that they choose to remain in poverty. People who belief this stereotype often do so because they believe that social

mobility is possible through hard work thus poor people are lazy people; this is unfounded since a majority of them work multiple jobs only at unlivable wages (Shipler, 2004). Others who endorse such stereotypes about the poor may also think that government assistance is sufficient to foster functioning as a safety net, but various data show that government assistance barely allows for basic functioning let alone potential for advancement. According to public opinion, the "satisfaction-paradox [is explained as a] conscious choice or shiftlessness[;this is a] belief that further stigmatizes and rationalizes the existence of poverty" (Olson & Schober, 1992:173)..

The satisfaction paradox stems from quality of life research that aims to understand the well-being of individuals or groups and their environments either objectively or subjectively (Olson & Schober, 1992:175). The objective approach has normative standards of low, middle, high, or optimal; it assumes that basic needs are objectively identifiable and can be legislatively instituted through social policies. The subjective approach focuses on the human experience, various dimensions of life on which people experience satisfaction and dissatisfaction are considered. While the objective approach is a direct relationship between one's level of living and quality of life, the subjective approach is a mediated relationship in which objective situations are perceived and evaluated resulting in a perceived quality of life (see *figure 1 & 2 respectively)*.

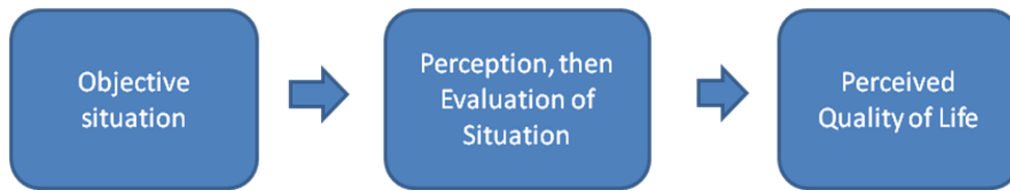*Figure 1*. Objective approach to quality of life research.

Figure 2. Subjective approach to quality of life research.

Olson and Scholer (1992) state that if quality of life is conceptualized subjectively,

individual discrepancies can occur between their objective well being measures and

subjective/perceived evaluations. As depicted in *figure* 3, if an individual is objectively well off

and perceives his situation accordingly his subjective perceived quality of life is "well-being." If

an individual is objectively doing poorly and perceives this, then his subjective well being is a

state of "deprivation." But two polarized discrepancies can occur, the first being

"dissonance/dissatisfaction-dilemma" in which individuals living privileged lives according to

objective measures that are still dissatisfied with their quality of life. This class of the frustrated

privileged as well as the "well-being," and "deprivation" are not the focus of this paper. Instead

it focuses on the people who live objectively unsatisfactory lives yet express satisfaction with

their life quality the "adaptation/satisfaction-paradox" individuals.

	Subjectively perceived quality of life	
	Positive	Negative
+	Well-being	Dissonance (Dissatisfaction-dilemma)
OBJ. WELL-BEING		
−	Adaptation (satisfaction-paradox)	Deprivation

Zapf, W. (1984): The four well-being positions. In: Glatzer and Zapf: Lebensqualität in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1984, p. 25.

Figure 3: Four positions of well-being (as cited in Olson & Scholer, 1992: 175).

But if one is satisfied, then what's the problem? As it pertains to tracking in America many minority and low SES children and their parents are ill-informed. As is later demonstrated of most low and middle track students, many of them are unaware of being tracked or its future implications. The importance of seemingly minor decisions such as taking Algebra 1 in eighth grade to meet the prerequisites for taking Calculus 1 in high school, a necessity to become a viable candidate for most top colleges, are not fairly emphasized to minority and low SES students.

Equality

"Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men"- Horace Mann.

If education is "the great equalizer of the conditions of men," then equality is inadvertently subverted by policies and practices such as tracking? Sociologist Jeanie Oakes states that in the past education inequality has focused on characteristics of the students (Oakes, 2005: 4). For example considering factors such as the student's home and family life, this is especially true if the students are products of disorganized and deteriorating environments (e.g., domestic violence and abuse). Low SES and minority children are generally stigmatized as "unmotivated, non-competitive, & culturally disadvantaged" (Oakes, 2005: 4).

The alternative to this student-focused view is to question whether the odds in the tracking process are equal. They are not. Students who are the most disadvantaged in other aspects of their lives also benefit the least from school. "Those at the bottom of the social and economic ladder climb up through twelve years of…public [school] and still end up on the bottom rung" (Oakes, 2005:4).

Tracking in the US School System

LeTendre (2003) sought to understand how students, teachers, parents, and administrators

defined tracking, the types of differentiation, the placement process they believed existed and

opinions they held on them. Furthermore they sort to understand how forms of tracking

internationally differed according to dominant cultural ideals on education and the societal role

of schools (LeTendre, 2003;44). They found that tracking in the United States was simply one

form of categorization that occurred mainly in primary and secondary schools and generally

across nations people demonstrated "patterns of concern and dissatisfaction" (LeTendre,

2003:44).

Tracking occurs in various forms; students can be sorted according to learning speed as

fast, medium, or slow learners, or put into fast, average, or slow classes based on achievement

and ability tests (Oakes, 2005). Students are also sorted according to courses deemed appropriate

for their future lives; in rare instances students have some freedom of choice as to "vocational,"

"general," or "academic" paths. Even here, choices may be heavily guided. How students are

identified and classified is generally determined by teacher estimates of what students have

already learned or their potential to learn. Some schools are more discriminate, providing

multiple tracks rather than placing a student in one track learning level; a single student might

have separate tracks for each subject– advanced science, regular English, low level math. This is

contrary to other schools where an isolated decision could determine a student's program of

courses for anywhere from a day to the next few years of their secondary schooling (Oakes,

2005:3).

Rees, Argys, and Brewer (1996) analyzed descriptive statistics of tracking in America,

their data was taken from two waves of the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) of

1988 which was conducted by the National center for Education Statistics. This data reflected the overall achievement level and academic tracks of eighth grade (collected in 1988) and tenth grade (collected in 1990) classes on over 20,000 students across America. Teachers were asked to categorize their eighth and tenth grade classes as above average, below average, or heterogeneous based off overall achievement. Tenth grade courses were even further categorized into honors, academic, general, vocational, or other tracks. This information was incorporated into other measures such as student, parent and administrator questionnaires to compile the following descriptives. For eighth graders, 14.4% in math, and 15.7% in English, at surprisingly high portions were at least informally tracked. Twenty percent of eighth graders in science and social studies classes were in heterogeneous classes. Eighth grade tracking practices did not differ significantly by academic subject, roughly a quarter of all students were in high achieving courses and less than 40% were in average achievement classes.

As for tenth graders the researcher found a slight shift from heterogeneous classrooms to more homogenous ones. This change was most salient in math and science courses were only 10.8% and 11.6% of tenth graders (respectively) were in mixed classes. When ability was not controlled for they found strong correlations between socioeconomic status and track placements. In English classes, 30% of the highest socioeconomic quartile students was in honors or advanced courses, while only 7.7% of the lowest socioeconomic quartile was in these same courses. For math the highest SES students made up 18.7% of the honors courses while the lowest SES students only made up 3.7%. As for heterogeneous courses, the researcher found a weak relationship between SES and percentage of students in heterogeneous classes; high SES students were less likely to be in mixed courses. This statistic supports the belief that there is a bias against low SES students in academic tracking since most mixed ability do not have

significant SES differences. The relatively lower number of high SES students in mixed ability classes might be reflective of "bright flight" or "white flight" (in integrated districts). Bright flight refers to the schools fear of losing their most "gifted" or highest ability students due to parental withdrawal of students (placing them into private schools), or even political actions taken by parents of students labeled as gifted to block reforms that push for mixed ability courses (Burris & Garrity, 2008).

Rees et. al., (1996) also quantified tracking data by race and ethnicity for tenth grade students, other studies have found similar trends for eighth graders. This study found that Blacks and Hispanics are less likely to be in high-track courses and more likely to be in non-academic courses than Whites. This trend was demonstrated in both formal and informal tracking policies in tenth grade courses. Relationships between race, ethnicity and mixed classes were as follows. Whites were underrepresented in heterogeneous math and sciences when compared to Blacks and Hispanics; however, this was not true in English courses. The data generally support the claim that ability tracking leads to racial segregation.

It is important to note that tracking was instituted because it was believed to be in the best interest of the students; given its overwhelmingly negative consequences and shortcomings why do unsuccessful tracking practices persist? Oakes argues that educators are accustomed to the ways in which schools are organized and conducted.

> A lot of what we do in schools is done more or less out of habit stemming from traditions in the school's culture…Many school practices seem to be the natural way to conduct schooling, an integral part of the way schools are. As a result we don't tend to think critically about much of what goes on…[These practices] are taken so seriously that we can hardly conceive of any alternatives to them…We seldom think very much about where

these practices came from originally and to what problems in schools they were first seen as solutions (Oakes, 5).

Regardless of how tracking is done Oakes claims that it has certain predictable characteristics (Oakes, 2005:3). First, Oakes states that intellectual capabilities and accomplishments of students are publicly identified and separated into hierarchical groups for instruction. Also publicly, these groups are labeled and stereotyped-slow, average, high ability-by teachers, students, administrators and others. These groups are not of equal standing in the school; "occasional defensive responses and appearances of special privilege [such as] small classes, programmed learning, and the like for slower students rarely mask the essential fact that they are less preferred" (Oakes, 2005:3). Oakes further states that "a student in a high-achieving group is seen as a high-achieving person, bright, smart, quick, and in the eyes of many good. And those in the low-achieving groups come to be called slow, below average, and- often when people are being less careful-dummies, sweathogs, or yahoos" (Oakes, 2005: 3). Lastly, depending on sorting decisions, the groups of students it forms, and how educators view these groups, "teenagers are treated by and experience schools very differently" (Oakes, 2005:3).

Common Assumptions & Justifications to Tracking

Justifications schools have offered for tracking students describe the process as a means to facilitate teaching and learning for the teachers and students respectively. They believe that students learn better when in groups of others who are like themselves with similar social economic standing, academic ability, and future aspirations for example (Oakes, 2005:4). The basis for this belief is that homogenous groups of students know the same things, learn at the

same rate, and are expected to have similar futures so they can facilitate each others' learning. In comparison, heterogeneous or mixed ability classrooms are thought to have disruptive effects on overall learning as teachers attempt to cater to the various demands of the students. Despite a lack of consistent findings, parents of high achievers and educators assume tracking is beneficial for them partly because they fear that heterogeneous detracked classes would lead to a "watered-down curriculum and lowered learning standards for their children" (Burris, 2005:595). Such beliefs are what spur trends like previously mentioned bright or white flight.

Additionally, slower students are thought to develop negative attitudes about themselves when regularly exposed to students who are more capable and higher achieving; the opposite effect is expected of students in tracked classes (Oakes, 2005:6). It is also assumed that students are fairly placed into their tracks based off previous achievements and innate abilities. This last assumption also implies that these placement metrics are appropriate for determining future learning in their courses (Oakes, 2005:7). Educators and administrators have argued that tracking makes teaching seem easier since groups of smaller students are easier to teach (Oakes, 2005:3). The deficiencies of slower students are thought to be more easily remediated in smaller concentrated classes where teachers can more easily manage and address individual differences (Oakes, 2005:7).

Challenges to these Assumptions

Homogenous vs. Mixed Classrooms

Virtually no evidence has been found validating these assumptions of tracking. The misconception that homogenous grouping aids learning is not only speculative but research

shows it could have a negative effect on education. It is a common and unfounded belief that bright students in mixed classrooms are likely to be held back. The deficiencies of slower students are not better addressed when they are grouped together; there is no support for the belief that children learn best when with other similar children (Oakes, 2005:8). Some developmental psychologists have directly countered these homogenous classroom settings opting for mixed ability classrooms instead. Previous research claims classrooms of mixed ability and even mixed ages can promote learning because higher ability students can further their understanding of the material by teaching it to their peers, while slower learning students are more likely to be responsive to the influence of and therefore learn from a peer.

This model of learning was first proposed by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky in his Social Development Theory. He argued that proficient social functioning aided cognitive development leading to higher thinking skills. Vygoskty advocated for classrooms in which children could undergo cultural development socially through interactions. He claimed that with the guidance of a more knowledgeable other (teacher, peer, older adult) and when challenged within their zone of proximal development, learning successfully occurred. The zone of proximal development can be understood as the distance between a student's ability to perform a task under adult guidance or with peer help and the student's ability at solving the problem on their own. As shown in *figure* 1 (depicted below) when a child is faced with a task that is too easy they become bored and uninvolved. If the task is too difficult they become anxious and overwhelmed. The zone of proximal development depicts the cognitive range during which a child can learn.
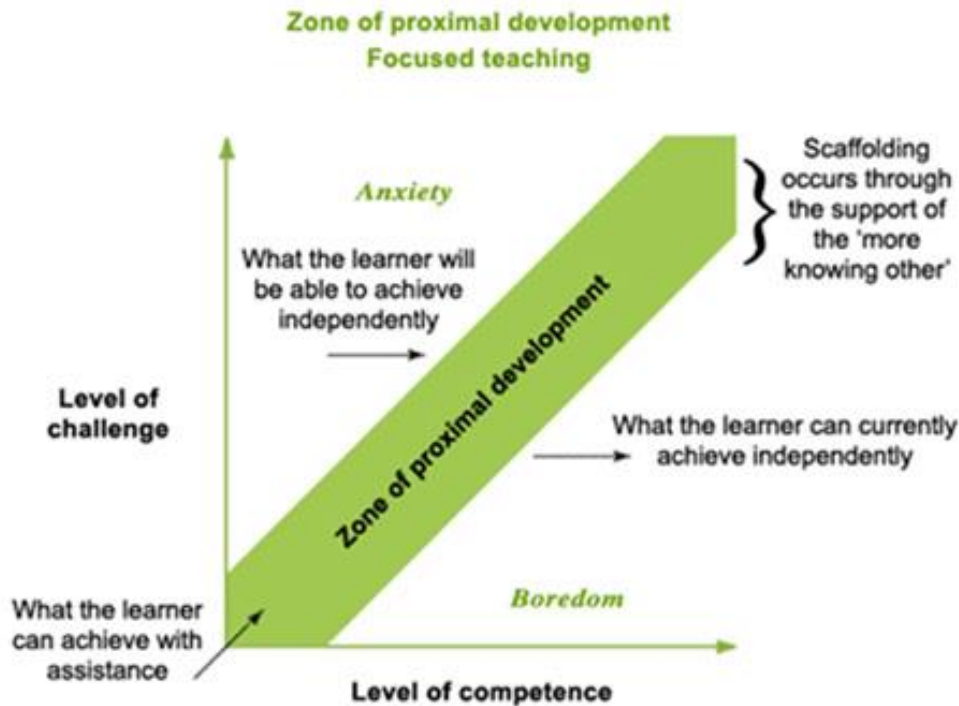
Figure 1. Graph of the zone of proximal development.[1]

One's zone of proximal development obviously varies by age, but other factors such as

education, social intelligence, nutrition and health, and innate intelligence to an extent influence

the overall range of one's zone of proximal development; meaning learning has its constraints. In

the context of tracking, low and middle tracks of students in homogenous classrooms with the

least experienced teachers are deprived of the informative and enriching nature diverse classes

can offer. They also lack the guidance of a social tutor (e.g. higher ability teacher) to

successfully undertake challenging academic material that's within their zones.

Cross-Cultural Comparison: Asian Schools

Models similar to Vygotsky's research are often employed in Asian classrooms where

students become accountable for each others' learning. These collectivistic mixed ability

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[1] Image source: Triad Professional Learning Team Concept http://lmrtriads.wikispaces.com/Zone+of+Proximal+Development

classrooms have been found not only to foster learning but to uphold an atmosphere of positive

peer regard despite perceived ability and a general reverence for education and academic

achievement. Stigler and Stevenson (1992) conducted a comparative study of educational

performance between children in America versus other societies. Overwhelming research found

that American children fall far behind Asian children in mathematics and sciences. Stigler et. al

(1992) focused on child experiences in the classrooms in China, Japan, and America and found

these differences in educational practices largely reflected strong cultural values.

> The organization of American elementary school classrooms is based on the assumption that whole-group instruction cannot accommodate students' diverse abilities and levels of achievement; thus, large amounts of whole-class times are given up so that the teacher can work individually with students. Asian educators are more comfortable in the belief that all children, with proper effort, can take advantage of a uniform educational experience, and so they are able to focus on providing the same high-quality experience, to all students. Japanese and Chinese teachers recognize individual difference among students, but they handle it in a very different way…They spend extra time with slower students or ask faster students to assist them, but they focus their lesson on teaching all children regardless of apparent differences in ability or developmental readiness…Tracking does not exist in Asian elementary schools. Children are never separated into different classrooms according their presumed levels of intellectual ability. (Stigler & Stevenson, 1992: 201-202)

Asian schools approached education with a collectivist nature that is similar to Vygotsky's social

development theory. Asian classrooms were generally set up to promote collaborative work;

group work that encouraged cooperative dialogs amongst the children and the more

knowledgeable teacher and were less likely to categorize and divide children to the extent of

American classrooms (e.g gifted, special education). In Asian school systems children of

different skill and knowledge levels were encouraged to work together and help each other (e.g.

faster working children were taught to help slower working children catch up).

Student Attitudes and Self-Perceptions.

Research on positive attitudes stated no evidence for the belief that average and low tracks would foster positive feelings. In fact they were found to exacerbate negative self perceptions in students in average and low tracks, particularly cultivating low self-esteem (Oakes, 2005:8). Lower tracked students tended to have lower aspirations for the future generally and for their educational plans. With other factors (e.g. socio-economic status) accounted for, a decent amount of negative attitudes exhibited by low tracked students were attributed to track placement. According to Oakes (2005:9) the negative effects on lower tracked students also manifest in their behavior. In general, low track students were found to participate less in school extra-curricular programs, display more classroom misconduct, be involved in delinquent behavior outside of school, feel alienated from school, and have higher drop-out rates. They also perpetuated negative attitudes from teachers and other students towards the lower tracks; for example viewing students in lower tracks as dumber (Oakes, 2005:8).

Track placements

Taken into consideration when students are placed into specific tracks are standardized tests scores, teacher and counselor recommendations, and students' and parents' choices (Oakes, 2005:9).   Intelligence tests are often utilized when a child's track placement is being determined. However, it is general knowledge that IQ tests hold a cultural bias as to what questions can be considered representative of general knowledge. Traditional IQ tests are reflective of general cultural knowledge for white middle class Americans; to date no test that free of these cultural biases exists. Furthermore, these standardized tests are not necessarily representative of the particular subject matter or course curriculum that a child might be getting tracked for (Oakes, 2005). So scores on these tests would not be adequate metrics of a child's ability for successfully

performing and learning the course material. IQ tests are formulated to omit the questions that most students get correct; then essentially put students on a continuum of high to low (Oakes, 2005). What exactly this continuum reflects is unimportant; what we should question is this self-fulfilling prophecy of the normal curve. *Figure 2* depicts below a normal distribution, which regardless of actual scores puts half the population below average. Oakes (2005) rightly asks that given recent research evidence that 90% of students with the right instructors and appropriate conditions can master course material, is this an appropriate way to look at human learning? Are standardized tests a fair enough determinant of a child's ability that they can dictate the quality of education the child receives?
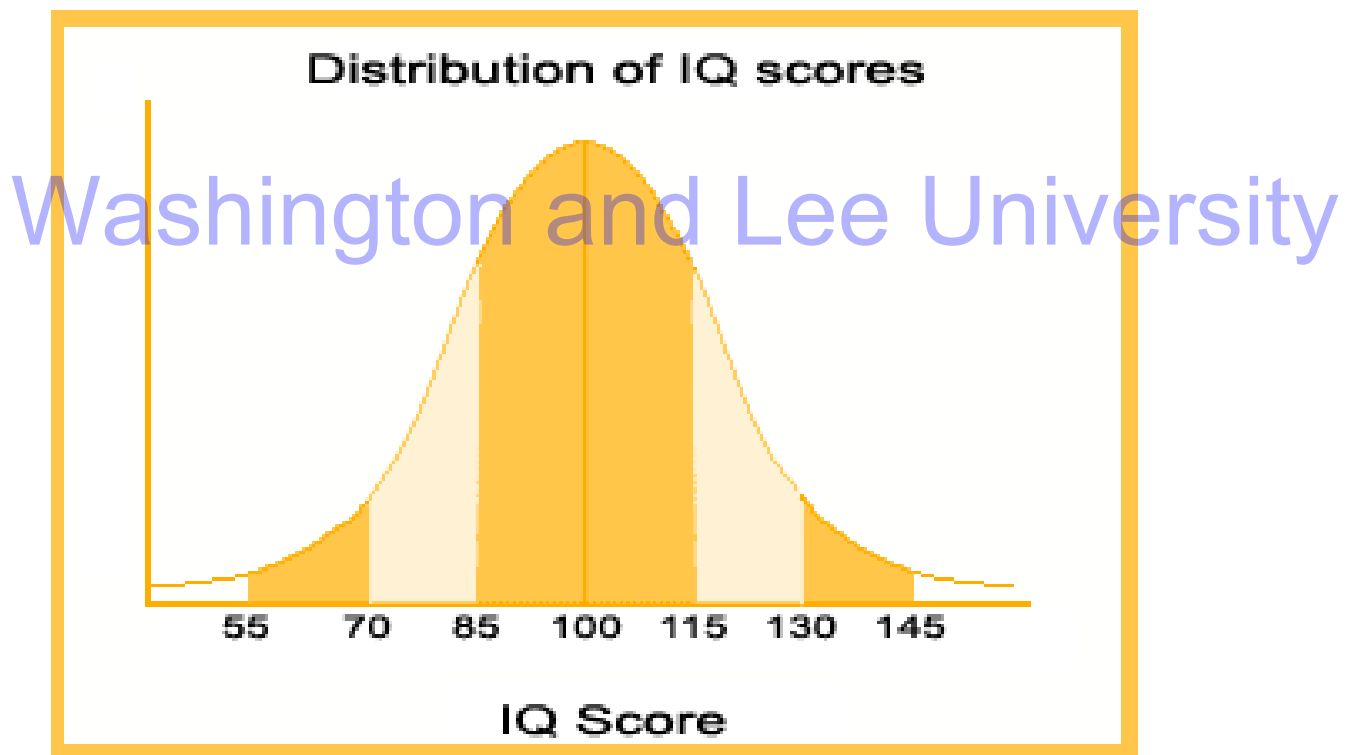

Figure 2. Distribution of the normal curve of population IQ scores[2]

Detracking

Researchers who study relationships between tracking, race, SES, and academic performance are overwhelmingly against tracking and believe it should be dismantled completely; regardless of a student's race, SES or prior achievement, they should not be placed into watered down remedial courses (Burris, 2005:595). It is strongly debated whether dissembling tracking would lead to closing the achievement gap on important learning and education metrics (Burris, 2005:595). Various approaches on how to close the gap have been proposed, with one of them being providing high-track curriculums to all students (Burris, 2005:595). What follows is a limited account of detracking efforts in America, their relative successes, and failures at cleaning up the residue effects of segregation, stigmas, and the satisfaction with lower education standards among minority and low SES students.

Formal tracking in the United States has been broken down; Lucas (1999, as cited by LeTendre 2003:45) Many states have officially dismantled their tracking programs at the secondary school level. However, even in these states, various longitudinal studies demonstrate the persistence of unofficial tracking policies in elementary schools through the end of high school. This shows that detracking efforts through academic institutions and legal efforts have failed to a degree; this is worrisome given the unacceptable quality of education in low-track classes in the face of a strong detracking movement (LeTendre, p. 45; Burris, 2005:595). Previous research has argued that the persistence of tracking is based "in values, beliefs, and politics as much as it is in technical, structural, or organizational needs" (Burris, 2005:595).

Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna (2002) conducted a comparative study of eight middle and high schools that were part of the nationwide ambitious detracking school reform movement during the early 1990s. Detracking is the process of substituting tracked courses or supposedly ability-grouped classrooms with mixed ability or heterogeneous classrooms. Educators explored

detracking reforms that sought alternatives to tracking and ability grouping; this movement was endorsed by both liberal and conservative policy makers who believed detracking would mean higher educational standards (Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002, 38). Their study found that dismantling the structures of tracks proved to be extremely difficult due to social, political, and cultural reasons. Yonezawa et. al., (2002) assessed tracks as political spaces, viewing tracked classes more than just physical places of students in separate rooms. They state that tracks are political and social spaces because we (educators, students, parents, and society) assign meaning to them; similar to population distributions in urban areas, racial and economic isolation of low track classes in racially mixed schools are not natural but instead the result of the interaction of various social and political forces (Yonezawa et. al., 2002). These forces are: : reduced opportunities for some, political strategizing by powerful elites, and cultural myths or stereotypes about non-whites; all hinder the supportive and informative nature of diversity (Yonezawa et. al., 2002). The problem with tracks being conceptualized and viewed in such a manner is that they "legitimize society's construction of merit and ability;" underscoring that a specific sector of society is innately more deserving and capable of a higher quality education (Yonezawa et. al., 2002).

However Yonezawa et. al., (2002) did find that in general schools attempting to detrack were more considerate of equalizing the curriculums between levels, maintained higher expectations for previously low tracks, had improvements in the quality of student work, and had teachers who became more reflective of their practice and raised professional efficacy. Mechanisms to detracking manifested differently dependent on the context of the school. Some of the schools they studied eliminated remedial courses and offered tutoring or "double dose" programs. Other schools utilized flexible grouping techniques in which students were grouped by

ability at a specific subject, but these groupings were reassessed and regrouped multiple times throughout the year to prevent stagnation and isolation.

Mechanisms at Detracking & their Shortcomings

Freedom of Choice & the Satisfaction Paradox

One of the main mechanisms implemented by schools to create more mixed classes to little avail was the freedom of choice; allowing students to pick which specific courses they took. Though freedom of choice effectively eliminated the technical barriers of the tracking process; it failed to deal with structural and cultural aspects of low, middle, and high track classes. This often resulted in middle and low track students failing to take or refusing higher course placements. When offered the freedom of choice, low and middle track students struggled to keep up with the rigorous curricula and tough competition. They faced identity crises when attempting to redefine themselves in relation to their new positions in a track structure that remained largely intact.

Research on attempts at detracking found that "freedom of choice" programs often fail to significantly promote low and middle track students into high track classes. Furthermore these children are often African American and Latinos (Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002). Yonezawa et al., (2002) found reasons for this little improvement

> They did not advance into honors courses, as some educators had hoped, for a variety of interrelated reasons: institutional barriers, feelings of inadequacy [tracked aspirations], and a determination not to leave the safe spaces they knew in low- and middle-track classes, made up mostly of minority students, for seats in majority-White honors courses where they felt unwelcome (Yonezawa et. Al., 2002).

Perhaps minority and low SES student's feelings of inadequacy and fear of leaving safe spaces can be explicated in terms of the psychological construct learned helplessness. Research has explained the satisfaction-paradox in terms of coping strategies: adaption, resignation, cognitive dissonance, social desirability, and learned helplessness that can lead one to be comfortable in an impoverished situation. Olson and Scholer (1992) state that studies on why poverty persists have found that the poor are viewed as either victims or blameworthy; the satisfaction-paradox would be classified under blame-worthy. They go on to state that more recent research argues that the structure of culture and society create a psychological state of learned helplessness in some poor people. Learned helplessness is the resulting state of a process or repeated experience in which an individual learns that the negative events occurring to him are uncontrollable by himself; the effects are low motivation to act in ways that change the situation and frustration with consequences of one actions. This frustration ultimately becomes depression and resignation, and diminished overall learning ability in similar coping situations (Seligman, 1979, as cited by Olson & Schober, 1992). This learned helplessness could result from individuals' initial frustrations with the "low pay-off from poverty programs or social workers' prejudices" against their customers' abilities (Olson & Schober, 1992).

In line with this theory of learned helplessness people become passive and stop seeking instrumental help (such as seeking better paying jobs) and instead seek in-kind-help (e.g., emergency services) making their coping behaviors to poverty in general ineffective and leading to dependency on emergency services (Olson & Schober, 1992). From a social policy perspective the implications, of course, are a drain on resources and the failure of safety net systems designed for short-term relief. People use multiple programs to sustain their impoverished state, building a career of poverty.

Institutional Barriers & Tracked Aspirations in Freedom of Choice

Institutional barriers that pertained to the uneven distribution of important information from educators to the students included educators responding selectively to students' requests for placements into higher courses, and hidden prerequisites that students encountered when implementing their options. Such barriers coupled with the negative effects of being a low and middle track (previously mentions) could serve as sufficient conditioning events to instill a sense of learned helplessness in minority and low SES students. They repeatedly feel they are excluded from certain elite information about college, their requests are ignored, and they are unqualified for higher classes.   These children become defeated by the education system. Past tracking policies in the schools were found to have a lasting effect on the form and content of networks that students formed with their peers and educators. Flexibility aside, a student's position in her community and school influenced the course information she did or did not receive.

Additionally, educators worried about evenly distributing information to varying degrees and this was partly due to the social-political and therefore social-economic position of the student. Take for example the following account

> Grant [High School's] waiver policies, [which allowed students to opt out of physical education requirements in place of advanced math and science courses] were well known to students who educators assumed would use them to advance their own education. Plainview [High School] counselors held parent coffees because White parents demanded accurate and timely academic information and because counselors believed that college-bound students needed such information for entry into top-tier universities. At Central and Union, however, educators did not see information about honors as critical for their students, as children of farm workers or military personnel. (Yonezawa et. Al., 2002).

Schools selectively altered their courses to match the racial and socioeconomic traits of their students. Similarly educators respond selectively to students request for higher placement, giving preference and even special attention to the requests of high tracked and White students while ignoring or stifling the requests of minorities and low track students. Below is an account of one Central High School teacher who altered her personal and profession schedule to accommodate the needs of some high-track students that wished to take an honors French course that conflicted with their schedules.

> They are my prize kids. They're my kids that take the honors, [courses]....
> They take honors everything. And they couldn't fit the extra French in, so
> they asked me to take them zero period. That's how bright they are.... They
> don't take cooking and sewing and that kind of thing. I don't want to lose
> those kids and I can't tell them no.... How could I tell a kid you're so
> bright, you're motivated, and I can't be flexible enough to help you? I
> mean, that's insane. (Yonezawa et. al., 2002).

Contrast this to the low-income and low-track students at Central High School, a majority of whom were Latino, reported numerous tales of their counselors and teachers denying or delaying their requests to enter higher-level courses

> One [student] recalled how he repeatedly approached his counselor to
> enroll in an advanced math course but could never get an appointment
> and, consequently, never transferred out of the lowest math. Another low-
> track Central student said, "It seems like they put you in a class where they
> feel it's right. They don't listen to your opinion on what classes you want
> to be in." (Yonezawa et.al., 2002).

Certain students were further prevented from taking advanced classes by hidden prerequisites for the classes. "At highly stratified Plainview High, where maintaining a separate elite track is seen

by administrators as the best way to stem White flight, choosing to be in honors classes was never as easy as educators reported" (Yonezawa et.al., 2002).

Is the failure of minority students to successfully detrack and enter higher courses in part due to a generational manifestation of the satisfaction-paradox? Poverty often tends to be multi-generational and lower SES families are associated with not only less education but also receiving poorer quality education. It is plausible that the same minority students in low and middle track courses are more likely to be lower SES. Yonezawa et al., (2002) found possible explanations to detracking failures such as feelings of inadequacy, fear of leaving safety, and feeling unwelcome. These findings closely relate to states of learned helplessness. Learned helplessness, some have argued is the working mechanism of the satisfaction paradox, and a key aspect of learned helplessness is a felt inability to improve one's situation through one's own efforts, in other words, poor self-efficacy.

Choosing Respect in Freedom of Choice

Yonezawa et.al., (2002) found that minority and low income student sometimes opted not to select higher tracks in order to have their self respect. According to the researchers students "hungered for places of respect" retreating to classrooms that did not racially and culturally isolate them from their backgrounds.

> Oppressed people often seek out "safe spaces" and "home-places," sites where they feel secure and liberated…. In the schools in our study some low-track classes and ethnic studies courses were seen by students as places where they could restore "the dignity denied [them] on the outside in the public world"…. [These findings] challenge current conceptions of low-track classes as fundamentally oppressive places. [The researchers] do not advocate maintaining high- and low-tracked classes; rather, [they] critique policies that aim to move students out of

low-track classes and into high-track ones, without altering prevailing

hierarchies in schools (Yonezawa et al., 2002:38).

Olson and Schober (1992) in their study to explain the mechanisms behind the

satisfaction paradox state that learned helplessness alone does not fully explain this paradox.

They postulate that the satisfaction paradox can be explained by learned helplessness in

combination with Festinger's cognitive dissonance. The theory of cognitive dissonance roughly

states that when one experiences a discrepancy between their behavior and attitudes they

experience a state of discomfort or dissonance in which either their behavior of beliefs have to be

altered as means of coping with or alleviating their cognitive tensions. In the context of the

satisfaction-paradox cognitive dissonance offers a behavioral explanation:

> Based on the assumption that dissatisfaction is a psychological state that
> cannot be endured by an individual in the long run because of the
> associated cognitive tension,… [t]he individual, consequently, has two
> alternatives to reduce this tension; either her or she changes the situation
> so that it meets his or her standards, or the standards are adapted to the
> situation…. [I]f the latter choice is made, a state of mental satisfaction is
> produced and the satisfaction-paradox is established. (Olson & Schober,
> 1992: 179).

Choosing respect over the opportunity to detrack and advance academically can be viewed as a

sort of cognitive dissonance. Since it is socially desirable for a student to take advanced classes

and be viewed positively as a bright pupil, a student's refuse to do so may be viewed as deviant.

The student may experience a state of cognitive dissonance manifesting from the wish to appear

socially desirable and advance academically in conflict with a need to feel included and for the

safety of one's in-group (whether a racial or social-economical in-group). The poor who accept

that they are helpless will stop attempting to alter their behaviors and instead adjust the

perception of their situation. *In* an attempt to rationalize the cognitive dissonance from a

stigmatized life of poverty, they appraise their quality of life positively or more satisfactory.

Students in low and middle tracks might be doing a similar thing in refusing to detrack they not only reject higher quality education for a stigmatized lower education, but they also alter their perception of their low track classes. So some students may suffer from the negative consequences of being low or middle tracked that leave them feeling inept at academic advancement. Other students may re-conceptualize their perception of these lower track classes by dismissing the social stigma associated with them and instead embracing them as a cultural safe haven. This sense of safety must not overshadow the purpose of education as the great equalizer in society and the idea that public schools should offer a fair platform from which equality can be achieved.

Parental Attachments in Respect to Detracking Efforts.

Incorporating all three elements, subjective model of quality of life, theory of learned helplessness, and cognitive dissonance, the satisfaction paradox can be explained as a "low satisfaction with life or a specific living condition that causes a cognitive tension that cannot be endured for a long time and therefore motivates [an] individual to take action for change. This action (coping strategy) can consist of actions that change the objective situation or [change the perception] of the objective situation" (Olson & Scholer, 1992: 185). Of particular importance in any child's life is the relationship they share with their parents. The satisfaction paradox in relation to tracking and detracking events can be further elucidated when one considers factors extraneous to the formal school structure such as parental and child attachments.

Parental attachments feed into minority children's fears of leaving safety as a child matures in the education process and begins to see the different career options that are available only with higher education; they may find themselves ill prepared to face the unknown. Attachment is described as the "strong affectionate tie we have with special people in our lives that leads us to feel pressure when we interact with them and to be comforted by their nearness in

times of stress" (Berk, 2008:149). Through his research with baby monkeys and surrogate mothers social psychologist John Bowlby described an internal working model which is a set of expectations about available attachment figures and how likely they are to provide support during times of stress. Internal working models become integral parts of one's personality and act as guidelines for the formation of all future close relationships (Berk, 2008:150). An internal working model can be thought of as a cognitive script that one develops about how close relationships with other people should function. These scripts are created as we grow up and develop close relationships with our parents and other significant care takers.

I propose that parents who are content with long term poverty find a sense of security in their situation, and this conveys to their children an attitude of compliance and discomfort with change or the unfamiliar. If a child witnesses the frustration, defeat, and even content that his parent may experience from failed repeated attempts to get out of poverty it might instill similar negative effects on the child's general self efficacy. Particularly in tracked schools in which students can very easily have no direct choice towards the academic path they are given, a state of satisfaction with being placed into the lower tracks may easily occur. This satisfaction can even continue when a child is given the opportunity to choose a higher track because of the previously mentioned barriers that unofficially hinder his ability to do so. If a child from an impoverished family sees his current situation as the normal situation to expect for himself, he may attain a sense of security in the familiar. Hence detracking efforts might have failed with low SES and minority students partly because higher track courses do not offer sufficient benefits for the costs they incur. After all, even though a minority child or low SES child is motivated enough to try and take a higher track they still face racial or social-economical isolation, tougher academic competition, and political-cultural forces to overcome.

Conclusions: Addressing Unofficial Tracking Policies

Burris and Garrity (2008) examined detracking efforts, efforts at educational excellence, and equality in a number diverse schools both in America and internationally to determine what can make detracking successful for all students. The findings generally support the that claim that to successfully detrack students from lower tracks a school must present a unified front of educators, administrators and parents who openly question their beliefs about schooling, intelligence, and fairness. Their findings can be surmised into three categories: the obligation and structure of schools, students' talents and merit, and quality of teachers.

Obligation & Structure of Schools

Though socioeconomic, home environments, parental factors, health care, learning abilities and natural intelligence differences all impact student academic success, schools can offer opportunities that when coupled with student effort can affect student success (Burris & Garrity 2008). Opportunity and effort are two factors in a student's success that educators can directly impact. So it is worrisome that students with the least resources initially get the lower curriculums and inevitably fall further behind. In such cases schools are intensifying the very achievements gaps they set out to close. Burris and Garrity (2008) argue for the acceleration and enrichment of courses to approve students' achievements. They state that instead of focusing on remediation students should have the choice of accelerations; eliminate the lowest tracks. Support for this stems from various research; for example, some studies found that "enriched, accelerated learning experiences for children at risk of school failure produce gains in both reading and mathematics" (Burris & Garrity, 2008: 149). As opposed to curriculums that focus on instilling and drilling skills, students should be taught through various strategies of

critical thinking while basic skills are reinforced throughout the way. Take for example

the snippet below of an Asian classroom

> Every elementary school student in Sendai possesses a "math set," a box
> of colorful, well-designed materials for teaching mathematical concepts:
> tiles, clock, ruler, checkerboard, colored triangles, beads and many other
> attractive objects. In Taipei, every classroom is equipped with a similar,
> but larger, set of such objects. In Beijing, where there is much less money
> available for purchasing such materials, teachers improvise with colored
> paper, wax fruit, plates and other easily obtained objects. In all cases,
> these concrete objects are considered to be critically important tools for
> teaching mathematics, for it is through manipulating these objects that
> children can form important links between real-world problems and
> abstract mathematical notations. American teachers are much less likely
> than Chinese or Japanese teachers to use concrete objects. (Stigler &
> Stevenson, 1992: 203)

Students' Talents & Merit

Burris and Garrity's (2008) findings go on to state that all students have gifts and talents,

so objectively labeling some as gifted is nearly impossible. Instead the enriching curriculums of

gifted courses should be made available to all students. In the right stimulating environment a

child's 'promise' or talents have the opportunity to grow and flourish. In addition to a rigorous

curriculum being the standard for all students, in detracked schools instruction—not curriculum

or educational standards—should be differentiated in heterogeneous classrooms (Burris &

Garrity, 2008). The achievement gap is not only maintained by unequal educational opportunities

it is also the result of societal disadvantages such as poverty. And though educators cannot

address all the factors that perpetuate the achievement gap, it is their responsibility to make sure

poor and minority students get their fair share of a quality education (e.g. experienced teachers,

technology use etc). The achievement gap can be narrowed through efforts that address

detracking as both a philosophy and approach to schooling and as a technical change. This

philosophy is one of equity in which the intent and actual effect of schooling practices are

constantly scrutinized and revised accordingly. This should also occur to a greater extent on a

national level, a conscious effort must be made to aid equality in segregated and underfunded

schools in poor neighborhoods (Burris & Garrity, 2008:152).

Quality of Teachers

Lastly, Burris and Garrity (2008) observed that the best loved teachers were not

necessarily the best skilled teachers, but they were the most personally invested teachers who

went that extra mile for their students benefit. Such attitudes are hard to teach; ideal candidates

for teachers should strongly believe all students deserve the best curriculums and act accordingly

(Burris & Garrity, 2008:153). It is the job of administrators to not only hire the right teachers, but

to support the teachers, and ensure they understand the philosophy of equity in schooling.

Instilling Dissatisfaction

The question now remains: how can schools make low SES and minority students

unsatisfied with their lower academic placements? In Seligman's learned helplessness

experiments he faced a similar conundrum; how can one un-condition dogs that have been

trained to believe their efforts have no effect on desired outcomes? Seligman introduced

new dogs to the same experimental batch that hadn't been conditioned to be helpless and dogs

were able to successfully complete the task. With enough repetition and by watching the new

dogs the original learned helpless dogs were no longer defeated and attempted to complete tasks

which they were eventually able to complete successfully. When it comes to detracking for low

SES and minority students, peer influence should play a positive role.

Since many low SES and minority student encountered cultural difficulties and were

forced to reconsider their self identities in the context of majority-dominant societies, schools

need to address the cultural identities of all their students (Yownezawa et. al., 2002). Whether

through heritage clubs that have a special emphasis on academic achievement or extra guidance

specifically on the matter from counselors and teachers; issues of racial comfort and identity

must be explicitly addressed. After all this is not a post-racial society, and with all other factors

accounted for in equity schooling practices, there still exists an innate in-group bias in all people.

It is human nature to find comfort and security in the familiar and fear the unfamiliar; though

such responses may be automatic at first through guided cognitive efforts they can be overcome

(Nelson, 2009).

Though a minority low SES student might feel out of place and suffer an identity crisis in

higher tracks these fears and uncertainties can be overcome if the student has a sufficient support

system. Support systems are within the scope of the school and educators control. Teachers

should be more aware of the different nature of these situations and ensure their lessons are

inclusive or at least responsive to all children's backgrounds. If parents of all children are equally

well informed of opportunities in their children's education, then a low SES and minority child

has an increased likelihood of having a parental support system. Family support and

encouragement act as a strong buffer against fears and cultural identity crisis a low SES minority

student might encounter in high tracks.

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