Book Review, Tracking Inequality: Stratification and Mobility in American High Schools, Samuel Roundfield Lucas

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The casual observer of school reform politics and rhetoric may not appreciate that secondary school students in the United States are no longer tracked into discrete ability-graded groups (e.g., college preparatory, general, remedial). Indeed, while academics continue to debate the costs and benefits of tracking, such debates have become increasingly irrelevant as secondary schools retreat from formal tracking and allow students to devise programs that can include courses of disparate ability levels. Although the curriculum continues to be vertically differentiated, it is no longer presumed that students should take courses at the same level in all subjects.

The purpose of Tracking Inequality is to examine the implications of this structural change for the reproduction of inequality. The detracking revolution was, of course, inspired principally by the civil rights movement of the 1960s and associated concerns with class-based inequalities. This revolution rested on two complementary strands of critique; namely, the “anti-IQ” reformers argued that tracking into a single ability level (e.g., “college preparatory”) improperly presumes that intelligence is a generic capacity determining performance across different subjects, while the “equal opportunity” reformers argued that institutions of tracking are further compromised by the tendency for track assignments to be class-biased. The former critique challenged the very premise of tracking, while the latter merely emphasized that it was unfairly implemented. It bears noting, then, that neither of these critiques was straightforwardly egalitarian in its implications. That is, the objective of detracking initiatives was not necessarily to eliminate the vertical differentiation of courses, but only to ensure that students were assigned to differentiated courses by virtue of subject-specific abilities rather than (a) class background, or (b) some presumed global measure of ability (e.g., “intelligence”). The question that then emerges is whether this dual objective underlying detracking initiatives was fully or even partially realized. As is well-known, school reform often has unintended consequences, especially when it is set against familial interests in class reproduction.

Using data from the High School and Beyond survey, Lucas in fact concludes that the reform was a “cruel and callous ruse” (p. 144) that only transformed class-based inequalities into more insidious and covert forms. This conclusion is rooted in three results: (a) In the post-reform period, children of middle-class parents remain more likely than their less advantaged counterparts to take college-preparatory courses, even when controls for aspirations and prior achievement are applied. According to Lucas, such class effects may persist because middle-class children have the information to successfully craft college-preparatory programs from the cafeteria of courses with which they are confronted, whereas lower-class children of the same ability and aspirations enroll in lower-level courses more frequently, if only out of ignorance of the long-term implications of doing so. The perverse irony of detracking is that it removes “signposts
that lower-class students sorely need ... to realize the implications of present choices [for] their future options” (p. 145).

(b) Although the rhetoric of detracking emphasizes that students should be allocated to courses on the basis of subject-specific abilities, Lucas finds that mathematics achievement scores play a dominant allocative role, affecting placement not only in mathematics classes but in English classes as well. These scores are evidently viewed as signals of generic capacity (much like IQ scores), but Lucas regards such judgements as flawed and thus refers to the “mismatch between achievement and reward” (p. 59) that reliance on generic signals occasions.

(c) In schools that are socioeconomically diverse, students are more likely to fashion programs of study in which the constituent classes are similarly graded (e.g., all are college-preparatory), thereby generating a de facto system of tracking. The main objective of detracking was to break the practice of assigning students to consistently-graded courses; however, Lucas demonstrates that this objective has not been fully realized, at least not in socioeconomically diverse schools in which detracking, if meaningfully implemented, would lead to much inter-class mixing.

This is, then, a standard story of (partially) failed reform. For all its coherence, there is little to suggest that Lucas has been willing to sacrifice evidence for a story, tempting though doing so always is. Indeed, Lucas is careful to lay out all forms of contrary and inconsistent evidence, relating such results as (a) the relatively large number of secondary students who take courses of differing ability levels (especially in socioeconomically homogeneous schools), and (b) the resulting difficulty in socializing students in any systematic way (given that students frequently take classes that are inconsistent in style or approach). The latter results suggest, in particular, that schools may no longer be effective in reinforcing class-specific cultures, as students in the post-reform period tend to assemble programs of study that are too diverse to generate any consistent socializing effect. The story that Lucas tells is nicely sensitive to all such complexities in the evidence. In this regard, Tracking Inequality is a model of how stories can be crafted to highlight the claims of interest, without also suppressing the inconvenient fact.

Are there any defects here? If pressed to deliver the obligatory criticism, one might charge Lucas with resorting too frequently to the language of trend without the benefit of a time series that includes comparable pre-reform data. There is, for example, nothing in the results presented by Lucas that precludes the hypothesis that detracking has both weakened the effects of class and strengthened those of ability, much as the proponents of detracking envisioned. This hypothesis is in fact quite plausible; after all, pre-reform systems tended to generate much parental intervention because decisions about future life chances were concentrated into a few fateful moments (i.e., when track assignments were made), whereas post-reform systems distribute decision-making over time and diffuse it across an array of course assignments, thereby obscuring the decision-points and perhaps reducing parental investment and involvement. To be sure, middle-class parents may be best equipped to negotiate the ambiguity and complexity of post-reform systems, but it is nonetheless plausible that even middle-class involvement is diminished relative to the pre-reform baseline. The main point here, in any event, is not that this alternative hypothesis is necessarily on the mark, but only that the true effects of reform are especially difficult to tease out in the absence of a directly comparable pre-reform baseline.
The foregoing is of course little more than quibbling and ought not obscure the larger message that *Tracking Inequality* is a major contribution. In this era of footnotes posing as books, it is refreshing to read a contribution that takes on issues of real importance, addresses them with innovative methods, and crafts the results into a powerful story that is at once compelling and true to the data. Unlike other authors, Lucas does not hide behind methods and refuse to spell out the implications of his findings, nor does he overstretch in an attempt to convert them into something larger than they are. The resulting book is surely worthy of a wide audience.