

Should Tracking Be Reformed? School Board Debate Activity

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Abstract:

This in-class activity is designed to simulate a school board debate to allow students to examine the differing perspectives about the school tracking debate. In this activity, the students will be broken up into small groups and given an assigned role. The students will be required to give a short speech in front of the class, arguing from their assigned perspective how the tracking system in their school system should be reformed (if at all). Other students are assigned to the school board who are responsible for making a decision as a committee as to whether and how they will reform the tracking system based on political constraints. Finally, the instructor facilitates small and full class discussions about tracking, social class, race, political power, and the implications for inequality and reform.

Objective 1: Students will compose a speech synthesizing how people's social positions influence their perspectives about the tracking system (i.e., race, class, placement in tracking system).

Assessment 1: By writing a speech and policy recommendation to represent their role's perspective, students will synthesize how a person's social position influences their arguments about the tracking system.

Objective 2: Students will analyze how tracking systems impact students differently based on the students' social positions within the education system (i.e., race, class, ability).

Assessment 2: By analyzing the speeches given by classmates during class discussion, students will analyze how different students and parents understand the tracking system to influence their educational trajectories differently (with optional post-class quiz).

Objective 3: Students will examine the social, political, and cultural forces that maintain tracking systems as a cause and consequence of inequality.

Assessment 3: Through analyzing the committee's decision other factors during class discussions, students will examine the factors that maintain the tracking system--and how those factors are a consequence of past inequality and a cause of current/future inequality (with optional post-class quiz).

Time Frame: 50 or 75 minutes

Class Size: Any (though probably best in classes of 75 or fewer students)

Keywords: education; tracking; K-12 education; inequality; role playing; political reform

Usage Notes:

Detailed instructions below.

Recommended reading:

Chapter 19: Tracking. 2011. In *Sociology of Education: A Critical Reader*, 2nd edition. Edited by Alan R. Sadovnik. New York: Taylor and Francis.

- Hallinan, Maureen T. “Tracking: From Theory to Practice” and “Further Thoughts on Tracking.”
- Oakes, Jeannie. “More than Misplaced Technology: A Normative and Political Response to Hallinan on Tracking” and “One More Thought.”

Set Up:

Review the roles and decide whether you want to make any additions or reductions based on your class size, time frame, and learning objectives. Assign roles either to individuals or groups depending on class size (though the school board committee should be made up of no fewer than 3 students). Before class either make copies or send emails with activity instructions and roles including some way of indicating which students have which roles. If the class is 50 minutes, I recommend at least emailing the instructions in advance so that students come to class prepared to begin writing their speeches. While you should make clear which role belongs to each student, you should still give them the list of all roles so that they can see what other perspectives will be represented at the debate in case they want to use that information in determining what to include in their speech.

Optional suggestion: If you would like, before class research when the next school board election will happen in your area. You can ask students if they know when the next election is and at the end of class encourage them to vote in these local elections that tend to have extremely low turnouts but can be crucial in determining local education policies.

Recommended usage: I created this activity for a sociology of education class. In my course I did this activity a few weeks into the semester so that I had already introduced students to the debate about whether the education system promotes mobility (status attainment) or maintains/increases inequality (social reproduction). Thus, they already had some sense of the fact that class and racial inequalities exist in the education system and tracking was one mechanism we discussed in this broader framework. However, this activity does not assume extensive background knowledge.

Note: I created this activity roughly based on the tracking system in the school I grew up attending in a mid-sized town in suburban South Carolina. The system is similar to many other tracking systems around the country. The activity is based on a setting in a moderate political town—neither extremely conservative nor extremely liberal—nor is it a large urban city. However, you should feel free to adapt different roles and structures to fit your local community if something doesn’t feel like a good fit for your town/city.

Debate Activity:

While I do successfully complete this activity and discussion in a 50 minute session in my course, you should ensure that you move efficiently through each section to ensure sufficient time to discuss the debate. During class hand out role assignments (if you haven’t already assigned them before class). Instruct students to create (up to) 90 second speeches. These speeches will be directed at the school board committee to attempt to persuade them to reform the tracking system in a way that would be beneficial for that role. As the instructor, you should move around the classroom while they work on speeches, ensuring that students are thinking critically about their role’s perspective. Note that the role descriptions describe the role’s feelings about the tracking system, though do not explicitly say what that person would argue for in the debate. Thus, student will be required to think critically about their role’s perspective based on

their social position (drawing on the reading to help them think it through). *Suggestion:* Encourage students to create a bit more of a backstory for their role, which can help them create and deliver a more persuasive speech that is better aligned with their character’s perspective.

Meanwhile, the school board committee members should use this time to debate and discuss amongst themselves what they think of the current tracking system—and based on their political constraints what they might be willing to revise. While you should instruct them to be open to the ideas presented in the speeches, they should go into the “meeting” with a pretty clear idea of what, if anything, they will change—like a real school board would do. Overall, you should give the class no longer than 10 minutes to brainstorm their speeches in a 50 minute class to ensure the class has time to discuss. The speech delivery is not formal and they do not need to write out word for word what they will say.

When it is time for the speeches to begin, the school board committee members should move to the front of the classroom so that the speakers can address them. You should instruct these committee members to be in charge of keeping time (they will generally set a timer on their phones) and they should have strict instructions for cutting speakers off if they go over their time. I suggest 90 second speeches, but you can make the speeches shorter or longer depending on your available class time. I also recommend that you display on the board or screen the order of speakers so that you do not waste much time transitioning between students. Furthermore, you should instruct students to stand when they give their speeches so that everyone can see the speaker clearly.

After all speeches are given, you should instruct the school board committee members to make a decision about what changes, if any, they will present to the tracking system. Students on the committee will likely be more comfortable making this decision in the hallway privately rather than in front of the class. You should give them a limited amount of time to make their decision (possibly 3-5 minutes)—while this will feel rushed, if they properly brainstormed before the speeches began they will just need this time to finalize their plan. In the meantime, you can invite the students who stayed in the classroom to share what they think the school board will decide in order to get them to start thinking about the constraints the school board faced. After the decision time is up, the school board members should return to the classroom and announce their decision. If they have not already, they should read their instructions (and roles if you decided to use them) so that the whole class can better understand the constraints they were given.

Full-Class Discussion Suggested Questions (Note: All these questions can first be asked in small groups, so that all students consider the answers before they are asked to discuss with the full class; use your discretion depending on how much time you have available and how engaged and talkative your class is; as a general suggestion, if most students don’t seem engaged in the full class discussion, have them discuss the questions with their small groups first. If they discuss in small groups first, I recommend displaying each group of questions on the board/powerpoint so that students can discuss the related question sets at their own pace. If you use small groups, you should still facilitate discussion with the full class about all questions.)

1) Questions about Debate and Perspectives:

- “What are some of the things that stand out from the speeches you just heard?”
- “Why do some people have different preferences than others about the tracking system?”

Use these questions to invite students to share what stood out to them during the debate. Ensure that you encourage a number of students to share their observations. While student comments will likely start descriptive in nature (i.e., person 8 made the best speech) you should guide them through starting to analyze (i.e., people's social position made them form opinions about the system that ignored how the system impacts people in different positions).

2) Questions about Inequality:

- “Who does the tracking system benefit?”
- “Who does it hurt?”
- “What are your actual thoughts, as sociology students, about this debate?”
- “Is it possible to have a tracking system that does not perpetuate inequality in an ideal world?”
- “Is it possible given the class and race biases built into the education system?”

This set of questions encourages students to analyze how the tracking system benefits different groups of students while hurting others. The conversation should start out specific (i.e., how the tracking system in this activity hurt or help specific students) and get more general (i.e., how tracking systems overall tend to operate). In this activity, you can see that the tracking system benefits those students who are typically benefited: those who are white and of higher social class backgrounds. In essence, these students have access to an elite curriculum and education within the public school while their peers are subjected to a lower quality education. If students do not bring it up, ask follow up questions to get them to consider who is likely to be best prepared to do well on a standardized test in 2nd grade to qualify for the GT program (white, higher social class children based on better quality preschools and language development when young)—thus this standardized test cutoff mechanism is generally channeling privileged students who had better early childhood education into better educational opportunities now. Furthermore, by creating the different tracks so young, the system pretty much ensures that it will be impossible for the lower track students to catch up to the higher track because they will not be exposed to the same level of challenging curriculum.

The last two questions should heavily engage with the debate in the readings for the day. In an ideal world without class and racial inequality, ability-based groups (tracking) could potentially be beneficial and efficient—as Hallinan argues. However, given the massive class and racial biases historically and currently built into the education system, it is nearly impossible to believe that creating different tiers in the education system would not perpetuate those inequalities. While segregation across schools has decreased some since the Jim Crow area (though certainly it is worsening again), tracking systems make it highly likely that segregation within schools will continue—and that separate is inherently unequal. Remember to guide this discussion by pushing students to critically analyze these points with at least several students giving perspectives about each question. Many of your students likely benefitted from tracking systems growing up so they may be resistant to the idea that it overall generally perpetuates inequality—help them use their conflicted feelings to drive home the complicated nature of this debate.

3) Questions about Politics

- What do you think is the likelihood this debate would occur in real life? That a school board would reform the system?

- Which roles do you think would come speak at the debate and who would probably not be present if this happened in real life?
- What factors shape the likelihood of reforming tracking systems?

This final set of questions allow students to explore why tracking systems are unlikely to change (and more broadly why political challenges to systems that advantage the already privileged are unlikely to be successful). First, you can lead them through thinking about whether it is likely that a school board like ours (in a moderate, mid-sized town) would convene a meeting inviting public comment about the tracking system. Encourage students to consider that institutions and systems have inertia and tend to resist calls for big change. Likewise, there would have to be sufficient public pressure to challenge the practice of tracking and in our current political and social climate tracking systems are not commonly challenged (though small details within them may be)—most people accept that tracking systems seem to make sense.

This can lead the class into discussion of the second question about who would show up to such an event in real life. If students don't bring it up, ask follow up questions to have students consider: where/what time of day school board meetings occur, who can easily get there, and who would feel comfortable publicly speaking to challenge school policies—all of these factors led it to being more likely that privileged parents and students (i.e., person 1) would be much more likely to attend in real life than those who are disadvantaged (i.e., persons 3 and 8). Without strong political pressure from disadvantaged groups, the privileged ones who benefit from the system will want to see it remain intact. Wrap up the discussion with students explaining holistically what factors would shape the likelihood of reforming tracking systems—referencing material in the readings as well as the activity.

Possible Post-Class Quiz or Test Questions:

1. In one paragraph, analyze how typical tracking systems impact groups of students differently based on their social positions within the education system (including race, class, and ability).
2. In 2-4 sentences, using the Hallinan and Oakes readings as well as the class activity, analyze how tracking systems arose out of past inequality in our education system.
3. In one paragraph, using the Hallinan and Oakes readings as well as the class activity, analyze how tracking systems cause current/future inequality.
4. In 2-3 sentences, explain why detracking or major reforms to tracking systems are not likely to occur in our current social and political context.

References:

- Hallinan, Maureen T. and Jeannie Oakes. 2011. "Chapter 19: Tracking." Pp. 347-358 in *Sociology of Education: A Critical Reader*, 2nd edition. Edited by Alan R. Sadovnik. New York: Taylor and Francis.
- Tyson, Karolyn. 2011. *Integration Interrupted: Tracking, Black Students, and Acting White after Brown*. New York: Oxford University Press.

School Board Debate Activity: Should Tracking Be Reformed?

Our school district currently has the following tracking system in place in its school system:

Based on standardized test scores taken in the 2nd grade, a small number of students (about 5%) are taken out of regular classes and will attend gifted classes for Math and English for 3-5th grade. In middle school, the same students already in gifted are automatically enrolled in gifted Math and English courses again, though up to an additional 3% of students may now also join them in these classes—based on standardized test scores in 5th grade.

In high school students who have taken gifted courses are asked which courses they want to enroll in as honors level courses and are allowed to enroll in as many as they would like. Students who have never been enrolled in gifted courses can petition to be enrolled in honors courses, though they must provide evidence of good grades and standardized test scores in the subject area and their 8th grade teacher in the given subject area must recommend the placement (this process must be repeated for every course separately).

Students who are enrolled in honors-level courses for all of their core classes may enroll in as many AP courses as they want. Students enrolled in individual honors courses may petition to take the AP course in that area if they have good grades and a teacher recommendation to do so (as space allows).

Some students, parents, and experts have claimed that this system is unfair to disadvantaged students who are less likely to get into advanced classes and therefore will receive an inferior education. Other students, parents, and experts claim that this system allows students to have their classes tailored to their ability levels so that all students have an education better suited to their needs and abilities.

Our school district takes all of these concerns seriously. Today the school board committee will hear from students, parents, experts, and school employees. Each group will select one speaker to represent their assigned role and will be given up to 90 seconds to speak (but will be cut off after exactly 90 seconds have ended). The school board will then deliberate and decide whether they want to reform the tracking system as it now stands.

Roles for each group:

1. Parents of white gifted middle school student who argue that their child was not sufficiently challenged before taking the advanced courses
2. Teacher in AP courses who complains that sometimes students aren't prepared for her classes
3. Parents of low income black student who was told there wasn't enough space in the elementary school gifted classes, despite the child (barely) making the typical cutoff test score
4. Education policy expert: Hallinan [from reading]
5. Education policy expert: Oakes [from reading]
6. Principal—better and more AP scores and tests increases the high school's rating—these ratings are important for funding, as well as a great source of pride for the community (and helps attract more well-resourced parents to the area who want to be part of the well-ranked public school system)

7. Parents of middle income white students (one gifted and one standard) who argues that their child in the standard level classes doesn't get the same level of attention and quality teaching as the child in the gifted classes—and all children deserve an equal education
8. High school senior who testifies about his unsuccessful efforts to get into honors and advanced courses in high school after being in standard classes through late elementary and middle school—despite his increased efforts when he realized how important education was, his school said it was too late because he wouldn't be properly prepared for the courses
9. Teacher of some AP courses and some standard courses who complains that the AP classes are disproportionately white and middle class: despite the high school being roughly 60% white, 20% black, and 20% Hispanic, AP courses are 95% white, 2% black, and 3% Hispanic. About 50% of the students receive free or reduced lunch in the school but only 7% of the students in the AP courses do.
10. A high school teacher of 40 years who only teaches standard level classes who recalls that before the creation of this rigid tracking system there were fewer behavioral issues in the classroom
11. Current college student who returns to home community to argue that his rigorous AP curriculum prepared him well for the challenges of college classes; he has seen fellow classmates who did not take as rigorous of courses in high school really struggle in college; makes the case that if the school wants to prepare students to attend good colleges, they must offer a lot of high-quality advanced classes
12. School board committee (see separate instructions)

Reminder: In your speech not only should you state your perspective I've given you, you should also make an argument about the specific tracking system here. In a manner consistent with what you think your ROLE would argue, suggest to the board how you would recommend reforming the tracking system (if at all). Remember, the school board members aren't just going to determine whether or not to reform the tracking system, they will be determining how it will be reformed (if they choose to reform it at all), so you can try to make sure it is reformed in a way that best suits your interests.

School Board Committee Member Instructions:

After hearing testimony from all the parties, you will come up with a recommendation about what the school district will do in the future regarding their tracking system. You must remember that the school board officials are elected positions and keep in mind that community members who hold more power are much more likely to influence your chances for reelection. Local elections often have extremely low turnout and most voters tend to be disproportionately higher social class—and the wealthy are certainly more likely to be supporting your campaigns financially (you will probably need at least a few thousand dollars each time you run). More importantly, you must make a decision that seems politically feasible to implement—remember, you are not sociology students deciding what ideally should happen, you are politicians who have to balance these conflicting concerns and take into account that change to existing structures is often very difficult to implement. However, you also take your role as school board officials seriously and strive to make policies that are good for the school district as a whole and want to make sure that all students who work hard can succeed.

Recommendations:

- Use the time while everyone else is writing speeches to debate as a group what reforms you think you want to do, if any. You might be persuaded by a speech, but you should set the foundations for what you think of the current system now.
- You should take notes as people speak about what they said and any ideas you have about the reforms you will implement.
- Decide how you will keep time for each speech and enforce the time limit for each speech to make sure to leave time for class discussion after the activity

Optional: Profiles for the individual school board members

(Use if you want to make the school board members have a clearer self-interest and direction in making their decision. If you use these, either share them at the beginning of class with all students OR have these students share their profiles with the rest of the class after the debate is complete. Feel free to change these profiles to reflect your own local community.)

Member 1: *Up and Coming Political Elite with Young Children*

Your family has held positions of political importance in your town for generations. You are beginning your political career on the school board with the intention of it launching bigger aspirations for town council in a few years. You already have good social and campaign connections with other local elites, but you need to make sure to not alienate any of them in order to not jeopardize your future political career. You have young children in preschool and early elementary school—and you are only willing to keep them in public school if they receive an elite education in the gifted and talented curriculum which they seem on track to quality for. So far, you are one of the most well-liked school board committee members because your connections have helped you secure access to greater funding for educational initiatives in the community because you know education is the foundation for your community's future success.

Member 2: *Community Member Determined to Help All Smart Students Who Work Hard Succeed*

You come from humble beginnings but unlike some of your peers you worked hard growing up to be the first in your family to go to college. You have successfully graduated college and

started your career. While you are in your early 30's and do not yet have children, you decided to run for the local school board because you are passionate about ensuring that children like you have an opportunity to succeed. You believe that a lot of students and families do not sufficiently value education—but you want to make sure that all smart, hardworking students have a chance to succeed. Since embarking on your campaign and now within your current position you have realized you were a bit naïve about politics: you need to solicit donations and compromise well in order to get anything done, but you're getting better at this.

Member 3: Former Teacher, Current Stay-At-Home Parent

You were a teacher for 7 years before having children and deciding to become a stay-at-home parent, at least until your children reach middle school (because your partner makes plenty of money to comfortably support your family). You enjoyed teaching but got really tired of the administration overreaching into your classroom and allowing mediocre students to pass along into classrooms for which they were unprepared, leaving you frustrated trying to teach students at very different levels within the same classroom—among other complaints. Now that you have more spare time, in addition to volunteering in the school, you have decided to join the local school board to represent the teacher's perspective. You want to make sure that teachers get to focus on their role as professional educators and do not have to get overburdened with administrative paperwork and/or other avoidable problems that make a teacher's life more difficult.