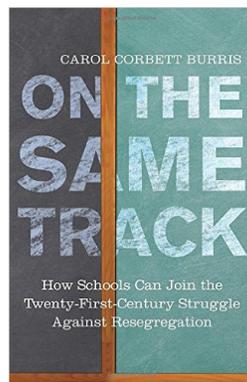

Democracy & Education

A New Imperative for Detracking Schools A Book Review of *On the Same Track: How Schools Can Join the Twenty-First-Century Struggle Against Resegregation*

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IN HER 2014 book, *On the Same Track: How School Can Join the Twenty-First-Century Struggle Against Resegregation*, Burris builds upon the compelling case made for detracking put forth by Oakes and others in the 1970s and '80s. Decades after the detracking pioneers, Burris revisits the tracking practices still prevalent in America's public schools through the lenses of those who are in the racial or ethnic minority and who are poor and at a time when school accountability often drives school practice and school choice to additional layers of sorting.

Given the compelling research, why do we need another book to make the case—to hold up the impact of tracking on student achievement, social outcomes, school culture, and expectations? In light of today's "reforms" and new expectations for all students to graduate college and career ready, we absolutely do need a deeper conversation on the implications of tracking. Burris (2014) builds her compelling discussion on Oakes's early findings on racial stratification imposed by tracking, reminding us of the 1976 US Commission on Civil Rights' finding: "The commission referred to ability grouping as 'the most common cause of classroom segregation'" (p. 8). Today tracking practices are more subtle, with students of color responding to social and peer pressures, mixed messages from school personnel, and lack of confidence when making school and course choices.

With Burris's (2014) detailed and artful review of the history and research, readers are compelled to affirm that tracking of any sort or

for any proposed higher purpose promotes achievement inequities that this country cannot afford. Further, the most current research presented affirms that tracking harms students placed in lower tracks and that these same students excel when placed in higher tracks, making a renewed case for the higher track being the one core curriculum for all students. Despite the progress that has been made under the umbrella of graduating all students college and career ready, the politics around power and privilege remains with us.

Burris's (2014) passion for detracking and equity for all students evolved from her personal journey to detrack South Side High School, where she is principal, in the Rockville Centre School District of New York. This story gets to the heart of core programs, practices, and policies that have ensured inequity of achievement in our public schools. On the surface it is a journey of successful transformation. Looking more deeply, Burris charts the strategies she implemented and orchestrated to support all students, demonstrating the essential need for wraparound services, increased shared leadership, and focus on instructional practice to shift the culture

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of the school—a systemic approach that is no easy task. The school was detracked through a decade of persistent effort to shift the mindset and core beliefs of faculty, parents, students, and the community. Today the school boasts a robust international baccalaureate program increasing the attainment of a Regents Diploma by Latino and Black students from 40% to 90%.

At the conclusion of Burris's (2014) recount of South Side High School's journey toward equity, Burris offers tips for success from her lessons learned. Some change leaders will not agree with some of her strategies ("elimination of the lowest track first," [p. 74]) or the gradual approach to heterogeneous classes. Burris's approach was to educate parents to move them to choose higher tracks for their children and thus allow time for faculty to adjust. Sizer once commented, "You have to change enough, quickly enough, so that gravity does not drag you back" (personal communication, 1992). A more rapid shift across an entire grade level, for example, forces more energy into full faculty professional development from the get-go. Further, gradual, decades-long journeys of change are at risk due to perpetual changes in school, district, and board leadership, not to mention the loss of another generation of students. All that being said, this process worked for this school and under the conditions Burris faced in no small part due to dogged persistence and admirable moral courage. The text recounts less successful efforts, highlighting the importance of community and parent engagement, artful political strategizing, and courageous, persistent leadership.

Burris (2014) gives leaders a firm reality check in her chapters on the politics of detracking and the role of leadership. Factors discussed that inhibit detracking include our traditional view of "fixed" human intelligence, stereotypical beliefs about race and class, and the sense of entitlement among parents of greater means: power, prejudice, privilege, and prestige (p. 135). While all of these factors create a complex environment for any school reform, among "entitled" parents, detracking is viewed as a great personal loss of educational opportunity for their children. It is this fear of loss that is the most challenging to overcome and requires persistence and moral courage among school leaders:

There is a belief that the students who are smarter and who work harder should have access to the best teachers and curriculum. In my experience I have found that far too many principals and superintendents have catered to such parents and students and reinforced that belief for fear of the power of the school's 'squeakiest wheels.' (Burris, 2014, p. 84)

The current public educational reforms and the political climate in which they live pose new challenges, and yet another layer of complexity, those who wish to detrack schools and create systems of education that ensure equity of opportunity for each student. Burris (2014) points out unintended consequences of resegregation from school choice, test-in schools, and charter schools. In efforts to improve schools through choice, particularly in urban areas, serious flaws in the choice system have emerged. Students are often sorted into "winner" and "loser" schools through city choice policies, with children who are poor and in the racial or ethnic minority having

little voice in the process. In the New York City choice system, it was pointed out that some 14,000 students were assigned to schools that they did not choose, the lowest-performing high schools in the city. A study by the Parthenon Group on the graduation rates of New York City public schools showed that schools with large groups of overage and undercredited students became one big, low-track class, increasing the chances of these students eventually dropping out (Burris, 2014, p. 147). The warehousing of large numbers of low-achieving students in the same school contributed to increasing the dropout rate. This is the new, 21st-century tracking.

This new tracking also plays out among test-in schools, magnet schools, and charter schools, both public and private. Many function as White-flight havens, drawing White students out of integrated public schools. We have to assume with the increased privatization of schools, teacher talent will be tracked as well. These factors, coupled with the increased accountability for teachers and students due to testing requirements for both progression and graduation, pose a huge challenge for the American public education system.

In her final comments, Burris (2014) poses yet another challenge for us to consider. She suggests that the current mission to graduate all students college *and* career ready is rapidly shifting to college *or* career ready. To me this is a most significant point to consider, as in the past decade countless public high schools have used major government grants (Smaller Learning Community Program, High School Graduation Initiative) to implement career academies. The core ideas are to provide targeted support in smaller learning environments and also to engage students through common career interests. The outcome could likely be throwback to the funneling of students into separate, unequal, predetermined life stations orchestrated by public schools in the post-WWII era.

Our schools are having a difficult time figuring how to encourage students to pursue challenging career pathways in science and engineering, health and high tech. My sense is that Burris (2014) would propose exposing all students to the many career options a rigorous education would afford. She would discourage schools from forcing students into career academies that result in tracking students vocationally or academically because they *may* want to study cosmetology instead of pharmacy. Will career academies result in fewer choices for students when they graduate, or will they open more doors for all? How will business and college partnerships enhance or limit equity of opportunity for more students? Many questions remain and point to the need for a thoughtful review of current student placement practices and data in our public schools.

Burris's (2014) volume is a strong must-read for teacher- and leadership-development programs. The most compelling elements of the book are not the solutions provided but the current questions and issues that we must confront to press toward a more equitable system. It is my hope that a sequel will document the consequences of the charter school and choice movements and the impact of career academies on student success.

References

Burris, C. C. (2014). *On the same track: How schools can join the twenty-first-century struggle against resegregation*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.