Section Two: The History of Tracking

By the middle of the 19th century, American schooling was coalescing into local systems stratified by grades and organized around a rational curricular system. The legendary one-room schoolhouse, which in some cases was inhabited by students from two to twenty years of age, experienced a remarkable transformation. To create a more manageable clientele age restrictions pushed infants and young adults out of the classroom. The curriculum at the time consisted of the books and learning materials that students brought from home. Reformers argued that teaching should instead follow a hierarchical sequence of topics, exposing students to increasingly difficult skills and complex knowledge. In many districts, algebra, for example, and other forms of "higher knowledge," were removed from grammar schools' jurisdiction and reserved for high schools.26

The 19th century high school served only a sliver of the teenage population, less than 8% until the 1890s. Private academies housed the teenage children of the well-to-do, but for the average student, whose family needed the income from his or her work, formal schooling ended at eighth grade. As a rule, public high schools administered entrance examinations, and the upper grades of grammar schools, especially in urban areas, provided preparation for these tests. Once in high school, students found that each year of instruction built on learning from previous years. The academic calendar was further divided into smaller curricular units and carefully presented in a logical sequence.

As educational historians have noted, the whole system was shaped like a pyramid. Common schools at the bottom educated the broad mass of American children and the number of persisting students steadily narrowed at each succeeding level.27 In high school, students were tested annually for advancement in grade. From 1850 on, age-grading gained in popularity, linking grade levels to students' ages, but
originally any single grade of the high school could be populated by students of different ages, as long as—and this stipulation bears directly on tracking—the mastery of prior content had been demonstrated. Matching students and curriculum appeared to unfold naturally because each grade level represented an ability group. The curriculum was the master of the high school student’s fate. Pupils who learned it graduated to the next grade level. Those who didn’t stayed behind or left school altogether.28

**Tracking at the Turn of the Century**

By the dawn of the 20th century, educators had started questioning this arrangement. America’s economy was shifting from an agrarian to an industrial base, and the demand for education beyond eighth grade escalated sharply. Students poured into high schools. With immigration also surging, urban schools in particular faced a more numerous and varied clientele. Political opposition to vocational education collapsed, mainly because its main opponent, labor unions, saw the growing number of private schools that offered vocational training as a serious threat to the public school system, an institution they counted on to improve their children’s lot in life. Progressive reformers cited an outpouring of studies suggesting that teens leaving school were bored with the high school’s academic emphasis. The progressives urged a more practical curriculum aimed at children’s interests. Academics debated the virtues of uniformity and differentiation in the curriculum, and careers were built by championing one side or the other in this debate.29

The 20th century’s comprehensive high school emerged from this cauldron of political, social, economic, and intellectual upheaval, housing within it distinct curricular tracks but promising a common set of educational experiences and a single diploma for all graduates. Entrance exams tottered and fell, and high schools gradually accepted all comers. The lines of stratification for students had shifted: from distinctions drawn by the highest grade level one attained, or by whether one even attended high school, to distinctions emanating from the track one belonged to within high school.

This structure guided the high school’s evolution into a mass institution over the next several decades. It was not without faults. Social Darwinists and racial segregationists twisted to their own ends the idea that schools should tailor activities more closely to the characteristics of students, insisting that children of different races and economic classes needed vastly different forms of education to prepare them for their rightful stations in life. Tracking was used as a tool of discrimination, especially during the Depression years, when students who might otherwise have been working poured into high schools by the thousands. Tests measuring IQ and academic achievement lent legitimacy to the task of placing students in tracks—and were used with both humane and pernicious intentions.30

There were also misguided attempts to fashion the curriculum around students’ personal needs. In the 1940s, the “life adjustment” movement convinced many districts to forego academically rigorous content for courses on dating, personal grooming, housekeeping, and other practical topics. At its zenith, this reform movement was so blatantly anti-intellectual that one high school principal publicly lamented that 30% of his students wasted their time by taking academic courses.31 Modern education promised something for everyone. Sporting a curricular menu packed with academic, quasi-academic, and non-academic electives, by mid-century the high school had become so fragmented that it resembled, in one group of researchers’ memorable metaphor, the modern shopping mall.32

**Sputnik and The Great Society**

A flurry of criticism and the Russian launch of Sputnik forced a reconsideration. Suddenly, Americans fretted that students weren’t working hard enough, weren’t learning enough, and weren’t keeping pace with pupils abroad. In the 1960s, programs for gifted youngsters flourished, especially in math and
science. The Great Society heightened concern about racial discrimination, poverty, and social inequality, spotlighting students who were badly served by the school system and giving birth to a multitude of programs that offered a helping hand. All of these programs—gifted education, special education, compensatory education, bilingual programs—targeted specific categories of students. Categorical programs institutionalized the conviction that any standardized education would shortchange youngsters with extraordinary needs. As categorical programs gained legal backing, their own administrative structures, and their own funding streams, the comprehensive high school grew more internally differentiated.

The Pendulum Swings Again

In the latter half of the 20th century, differentiation in the form of tracking came under fire. In books such as James Rosenbaum’s (1976) *Making Inequality*, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis’s (1976) *Schooling in Capitalist America*, John Goodlad’s (1984) *A Place Called School*, and Jeanne Oakes’s (1985) *Keeping Track*, critics assailed tracking for reproducing and exacerbating social inequalities. They pointed out that poor, non-English speaking, and minority youngsters were disproportionately assigned to low tracks and wealthier, white students to high tracks—and concluded that this was not a coincidence. Oakes’s book helped ignite a firestorm of anti-tracking activity. Tracking was blamed for unfairly categorizing students, stigmatizing struggling learners, and consigning them to a fate over which neither they nor their parents had control. The indictment spread from scholarly journals to the popular press. A 1988 article in *Better Homes and Gardens* asked, "Is Your Child Being Tracked for Failure?" In 1989, *Psychology Today* ran "Tracked to Fail" and *U.S News and World Report* published "The Label That Sticks." Although the anti-tracking movement’s left-leaning political base conflicted with that of the movement for rigorous academic standards, parental choice, and other grassroots proposals that gained popularity in the late 1980s, it managed to hitch its wagon to growing public demand for excellence in the public schools.

To sum up, the school system’s historical search for the best way of organizing students and curriculum has never produced a method immune from criticism. The contemporary indictment of tracking boils down to the contention that ability grouping systems are inefficient and unfair, that they hinder learning and distribute learning inequitably. These complaints command center stage in the research on tracking and ability grouping.

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