

BOOK REVIEWS

School Reform, Politics, and Tracking: Should We Pursue Virtue?

The Tracking Wars: State Reform Meets School Policy. Tom Loveless. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999. 194 pp., \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-8157-5306-3; \$16.95 (paperback), ISBN 0-8157-5305-5.

Becoming Good American Schools: The Struggle for Civic Virtue in School Reform. Jeannie Oakes, Karen Hunter Quartz, Steve Ryan, and Martin Lipton. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000. 256 pp., \$28.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-7879-4023-2.

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At a time when school reform has joined taxes and abortion in the competition for politicians' nightly news sound bites, two newly published books should contribute—albeit differently—to the school reform debate. These useful books present remarkable counterpoints to each other; we recommend that they be read in tandem. Readers who do so will learn a great deal about the limits and possibilities of school reform, detracking, and the pursuit of virtue in American school reform.

The Tracking Wars: State Reform Meets School Policy, by Tom Loveless, purports to explain why organizational and institutional forces make detracking reforms extremely difficult to implement. He aspires to set forth a normatively neutral analysis of factors associated with detracking. In doing so, Loveless states that he is careful to avoid value issues such as "virtue." He characterizes his study and his findings as "relatively objective and protected

from investigator bias" (Loveless, 1999, p. 9). In addition, Loveless positions his book as a critique of Jeannie Oakes and her first book, *Keeping Track* (1985).

Loveless's study of middle school reform is modest in scope, data, and theory, but it is quite ambitious in its conclusions, especially with regard to tracking. Based on surveys of administrators and interviews with educators in two states, he concludes that most previous researchers of tracking got it all wrong. He calls for us to set aside the assertedly emotional arguments against tracking popularized by Oakes's *Keeping Track* and engage in fresh, empirical examinations of the benefits of tracked and untracked classes.

Becoming Good American Schools: The Struggle for Civil Virtue in School Reform, by Jeannie Oakes, Karen Hunter Quartz, Steve Ryan, and Martin Lipton, unabashedly approaches reform through the lens of civic virtue. The authors describe themselves as "prisoners of hope," persisting because they "believe that schooling grounded by educativity, social justice, caring, and democratic participation is right and good and moral" (Oakes et al., 2000, p. 309). They present results of a 5-year implementation study of the Carnegie Council for Adolescent Development's middle school project entitled *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (1989). *Turning Points* urges schools to shift "from departmentalized, impersonalized, content-driven classrooms to child-centered, interdisciplinary learning communities, rich with opportunities for students to learn collectively and experientially through deep engagement in thematic, problem-based curricula" (Oakes et al., p. 27). As part of this process, *Turning Points* unequivocally recommends detracking, as well as block scheduling, cooperative learning, constructivism, hands-

on activity, interdisciplinary curriculum, and authentic assessment.

Oakes and her colleagues tell a pro-reform story, crafting that story with an intent to assist as the nation tries to restructure its schools. Their book is ambitious in its theory and its scope. Their conclusions, too, are ambitious, arguing for a transformation in how Americans approach school change. The book's themes revolve around educators' struggle to further the common, public good by becoming more serious about student learning and more inclusive of children from diverse backgrounds, and by forming more caring communities and genuinely participatory institutions.

Becoming Good American Schools

The heart of *Becoming Good American Schools* is dedicated to a detailed exploration of how civic virtue did, or did not, come to the fore in the *Turning Points* schools. Over a 5-year period, the authors examined the reform's implementation in 16 schools spread over five states: California, Massachusetts, Vermont, Texas, and Illinois. They conducted in-depth longitudinal comparative case studies involving research teams that made repeated several-day visits to the schools. Data included pre- and post-visit interviews, extensive observations, and documents from district- and state-level sources.

Drawing upon rich qualitative data, the authors weave examples throughout the book of classroom practices desired by *Turning Points*. They also present examples of failures to implement the practices or intent of *Turning Points*. These local reform stories provide practical illustrations of the book's themes concerning reform and civic virtue. The authors ground these examples in American cultural tradi-

tion, especially the tension between ideals of civic virtue and the powerful American lore about, and drive for, individualism. The richness of these examples is both a strength and a weakness of *Becoming Good American Schools*. While the details offer substantive examples of the larger points Oakes and her associates are making, the voices of so many people make the book a lengthy and sometimes laborious read.

The authors are at their best when they crisply synthesize theory and data. For instance, Oakes and her colleagues explore how educational policymaking and policy implementation might best address the cultural and political forces that shape and constrain school improvement efforts. This inquiry leads them to critique the culture of school reform, which they argue is an inherently conservative "reform mill" that grinds out reworked versions of the status quo. The reform mill's failures are not due to the shortcomings of educators; they are instead attributable to its "inability and unwillingness to marshal social commitments to make schools places of civic virtue—places where adults and children experience educativity, care, social justice, and democratic participation" (p. 265). The authors thus refuse to view these reforms as value-neutral. They praise educators and local and state policymakers who were enticed by *Turning Points* to challenge the reform mill and move toward civic virtue—toward "norms, policies, and practices that promote the public good through a citizenry educated to come together across differences and solve common problems in a democratic public sphere" (p. 5). *Turning Points'* success, however, was far from universal. Oakes and her colleagues observe that the reforms were usually introduced in schools as techniques rather than as fundamentally different ideas.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, Oakes and her colleagues conclude that in nearly all schools they studied, the process of tackling the complex task of creating good American schools made those schools better for children and adults than they would have been otherwise. The most fundamental and meaningful changes, they conclude, are grounded in a drive toward betterment. This Aristotelian conception of betterment, they explain, not only has

a goal of desirable educational outcomes but also involves a desirable process. "The hard work of becoming a good American school . . . must itself be educative, socially just, caring, and participatory" (p. 262). Betterment, the authors contend, is more "humane and meaningful" than the usual reform mill.

The Tracking Wars

Loveless begins with a different set of presumptions. He dismisses the usefulness of virtue as a concept in thinking about detracking: "I assume that virtue is found in equal amounts in tracking's defenders and critics. . . . [B]oth tracking and detracking are morally legitimate" (p. 57). He also describes schools in a manner whereby tracking might make sense: Schools are "places for students to learn content that is designated, authoritatively, by someone else" (p. 13). These schools, he argues, have a three-part challenge: "deciding what students should know (content), deciding what they are capable of learning (ability), and finally, reconciling the content with students' ability to learn it" (p. 13). He speaks of the importance of "matching students with curriculum" and having "a legitimate party [deciding what] students should learn" (p. 13).

The core of his well-written book is an examination of middle schools' responses to detracking reforms in California and Massachusetts. Eschewing normative discussions, his inquiry focuses on contextual factors associated with detracking that, he contends, can be measured without researcher bias—such as school size, urbanicity, demographics, and structure. His conclusions ultimately key on correlational findings (e.g., smaller school size correlates to less tracking), suggesting that "tracking and untracking involve more than the clash of vile and noble intentions" (p. 9).

Such conclusions are, of course, consistent with findings generally reached by most other scholars of reform. Acknowledging that normative issues are not the entire story does not necessitate dismissing them as relatively insignificant in building an understanding of the reform process. Yet this is the logical leap taken by Loveless. While conceding that it would be naive for him to "deny that racism and

other evils exist or to argue that motives are irrelevant to understanding public policy," he dichotomizes between values and measurable context—and he chooses to focus on the latter (p. 57). He defends this central decision as follows: "regardless of motives, people are constrained by the settings in which they make decisions" (p. 57). His study, accordingly, explores the immediate environment surrounding tracking decisions, including schools' organizational properties. Jeannie Oakes, he argues, is misguided in that she is most concerned about constraints that "emanate from society's political and social structures" rather than the organizational environment (p. 57).¹

Loveless's book presents the results of his investigation into the extent of tracking reform brought about by state-level policy documents that, among other things, recommend detracking (California's *Caught in the Middle*, 1987, and Massachusetts's *Magic in the Middle*, 1993). Although neither state attached a mandate or direct funding to its recommendations, Loveless argues that these documents drove widespread tracking reform and he seeks to explain this phenomenon by examining measurable context. "Tracking policy," he contends, "is a function of individual policymaking environments, consisting of each school's institutional and organizational characteristics, political influences on policy, and the technical challenge of reform" (p. 3). His study hypothesizes that "it is these environments that lead some schools to embrace detracking and others to reject it" (p. 3).

The Tracking Wars presents the results of a series of principal surveys and educator interviews in selected California and Massachusetts schools that Loveless conducted for his dissertation. The empirical basis of Loveless's study was three surveys that asked principals to "report the number of ability levels in which their school grouped eighth graders for academic classes [and asked whether] this system had changed during the previous five years and how many levels existed in the prior system . . ." (p. 42). He obtained response rates of 42%, 48%, and 48% for the three surveys. Although the author characterizes the amount of detracking as extensive, he also acknowledges that the study's

methodological limitations did not allow him to draw such conclusions:

Since it is impossible to know why principals did or did not return surveys, interpretation of results must be offered cautiously. This would be a significant problem if the study's objective were to precisely estimate the amount of tracking and untracking in schools. The study's primary goal of explaining why some schools track and others detrack makes it more important that a wide variety of tracking policies are represented in the data and in numbers sufficient for analyzing the different conditions surrounding different practices. (pp. 41–42)

Particularly given that these principals were responding to a survey asking about a politically charged issue, we agree that Loveless's data were better suited to explorations of "why" than questions about "what," "where," and "how much." But some of his most aggressive conclusions fall into the latter categories.

Loveless concludes, for instance, that detracking was extraordinarily prevalent (e.g., that California had a four-fold increase in detracked schools between 1986 [11%] and 1994 [44%]) and that most schools that have embraced detracking serve predominantly poor and low-achieving students. Based on these findings, he moves well beyond his data to conclude: (a) "High-achieving minority students in low-income, urban schools are most at risk of suffering from the abolition of tracking;" and (b) "If tracking is bad policy, society's elites are irrationally reserving it for their own children" (pp. 154–155).

The *Tracking Wars's* data, methods, and findings offer little support for its provocative inferences. Moreover, all the book's conclusions must be tempered by his unusual definition of "untracked" (used interchangeably with "detracked"). As Loveless explains, an untracked school in his study was a school that maintained, for the eighth grade, a single level of English and no more than two levels of math. He chose this definition for a very practical reason: "Schools with fully detracked math programs are still rare, less than 20 percent in either state" (p. 44). Later in his book, Loveless further undermines this definition of untracked, noting that ability grouping of math in small schools drove homogeneous English classes because of scheduling con-

straints—classes that he nonetheless labeled as "untracked" (p. 131). In fact, his purported comparisons are not between tracked and untracked schools. From our perspective, the book's conclusions about "tracked" and "untracked" schools are better conceived of as comparisons of self-selected highly tracked schools with a mix of other self-selected schools, some of which are untracked (about 30%, using his figures) but most of which (about 70%) have a significant but limited amount of tracking.

Finally, consider again one of the book's overriding themes: A minimization of the role that values and beliefs play in school reform. This contention drives Loveless to shun a full contextual analysis of the detracking process. For instance, while he identifies student demographics as an institutional force, he does not probe into the process by which those demographics might influence policy. We would argue that the impact of demographics is unlikely to be felt directly; rather, demographics influence policy when combined with the values, beliefs, and perceived interests of political actors (Lipman, 1998; Oakes, 1992; Welner, in press). Understanding the reform process requires an analysis of this entire scope. As Loveless himself explains,

If we want to know why tracking reform is accepted by some schools and rejected by others, we must understand why schools make the decisions they do. The undulations of local policymaking must be explored, mapped, and built into any robust explanation of school reform. (p. 11)

Unfortunately, because of an absence of such an examination of normative issues, Loveless's book falls short of his own standard.

Keeping Track of Keeping Track

Couching his argument against detracking in a harsh and personalized critique of Oakes's *Keeping Track* and of the willingness of others to accept what he terms as Oakes's political and values-based conclusions, Loveless questions the validity of widely held beliefs about the dangers of tracking. The crux of Loveless's critique of the corpus of Oakes's scholarship is that her attention to matters of value and virtue blinded her to the purported dearth of "empirical" evidence concerning the merits of tracking. Without "empirical"

or "scientific" evidence, Loveless argues, schools carelessly embarked upon a potentially harmful reform. Throughout his book, Loveless reiterates his belief that "empirical research has failed to resolve the most important questions about tracking" (p. 12).

While a much-needed national database would allow for a more careful and thorough exploration of the impact of grouping practices on achievement, we find the existing empirical research to be much more convincing than does Loveless (see, e.g., Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992; Slavin, 1990; Wheelock, 1992). In a nutshell, this substantial body of research demonstrates that low-track classes are consistently characterized by lowered expectations, reduced resources, rote learning, less-skilled teachers, amplified behavioral problems, and an emphasis on control rather than learning. Loveless himself states that research "has verified again and again . . . that many low-track classes are deadening, noneducational environments" (p. 21). The extant empirical research has also demonstrated that low-track classes are rarely remedial; that is, students placed in a lower track tend not to move later to higher tracks and, in fact, suffer from decreased ambitions and achievement (Oakes, 1990). Track placements, while increasingly subject to parental and student choice, remain highly rigid and highly correlated to race and class—over and above measured academic achievement (Lucas, 1999; Mickelson & Heath, in press; Welner, in press).

Numerous scholars and policymakers have studied this body of research and reached the conclusion that Loveless dismisses: Tracking is fundamentally unfair. Loveless traces this unfairness argument to one particular book:

The argument that tracking is fundamentally unfair and socially reprehensible permeates the politics of the issue, *running like a steel rod* from Jeannie Oakes's seminal book, *Keeping Track*, through the rise of the detracking movement in the late 1980s, to the explicit and authoritative endorsements of detracking that the policies of California and Massachusetts represent. (p. 12, emphasis added)

This "steel rod" simile summarizes another of Loveless's central themes. He characterizes *Keeping Track* in simpli-

fied and extreme terms, attacks his own caricature, then argues that the detracking house of cards deserves to crumble.

Similarly, he offers a distorted characterization of the "prevailing explanation" for tracking's existence: "that the practice of grouping students by ability is and always has been about race, class, and inequality—that when everything else is stripped away, maintaining special privileges for some students and denying them to others is the dominant theme of all tracking decisions" (p. 3). In reality, most tracking research (including the research presented in *Becoming Good American Schools*) sees tracking decisions as extremely complicated, with race and class issues playing a significant role that is sometimes dominant and sometimes virtually non-existent (see Lucas, 1999; Welner, in press).

Loveless's characterization of *Keeping Track's* influence is similarly exaggerated. He commits the logical fallacy *post hoc ergo propter hoc* ("after this, therefore because of this"). *Keeping Track*, he argues, caused a variety of subsequent events—from detracking to a stagnation in progress toward reducing the Black-White test score gap. He ignores *Keeping Track's* predecessors (e.g., Rosenbaum, 1976; Spring, 1976; see also *Hobson v. Hansen*, 1967) and successors (e.g., Moore & Davenport, 1988; Slavin, 1987, 1990). Loveless also minimizes forces that may have directly influenced moves to detrack in the schools that he studied. For instance, the same year that Massachusetts issued *Magic in the Middle* (1993), the National Governors' Association (NGA) called for detracking in a report entitled *Ability Grouping and Tracking: Current Issues and Concerns*. In addition, the Carnegie Corporation issued *Turning Points* in 1989, the same year that The College Board urged detracking in its report called *Access to Knowledge*. Loveless characterizes such reports as the spawn of *Keeping Track*—giving them little or no independent stature.

Indeed, *Keeping Track* was influential. Loveless's search of the Social Science Citation Index revealed that it was the third most cited education-related text of the past decade. We do not hesitate to acknowledge that the book had a significant impact on the debate surrounding tracking, including the NGA and Carnegie reports. But Loveless overstates his case. Many other active forces undoubtedly formed

the "zone of mediation"—the context—for the middle school detracking debate (see Welner, in press).

Politics, Values, and American School Reform

In his foreword to Loveless's 1998 report that later grew into *The Tracking Wars*, Fordham Foundation President Chester Finn correctly calls attention to the need to distinguish between evidence and pseudo-evidence that muddles educational policy debates. With this admonition in mind, we are concerned that *The Tracking Wars* rests upon data that, pursuant to Loveless's own warning, should have been interpreted more cautiously. Whether "pseudo-evidence" or genuine evidence, his limited data are insufficient to ground the bold and sweeping empirical claims and forceful policy implications asserted throughout the book.

While arguing that *The Tracking Wars* has minimal scholarly importance, we do find the book to be important because of its likely use as a political tool in current and future school reform battles. Just as Chubb and Moe's *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (1990) served the school choice movement, Loveless's book will likely find a home within the policy arsenal against detracking. Similarly, Loveless's claims of value-neutrality are eerily reminiscent of Chubb and Moe's portraiture of their own role as mere social scientists examining an interesting question about the relationship between school autonomy and student achievement.

In the final analysis, *The Tracking Wars* attempts to cast doubt on the need for, and the efficacy of, tracking reform, arguing that we should only tinker with the status quo. In particular, Loveless argues that schools should raise the expectations in low-track classes, which he acknowledges to be a source of inequity. In contrast, *Becoming Good American Schools* aims to explain how meaningful reform, including tracking reform, can be done, and the book urges action. Oakes and her colleagues offer us a blueprint complete with contexts and caveats.

The contrast between these two books highlights the tension that has recently arisen between, on the one hand, scholars and policy analysts who challenge the widely accepted research basis for detracking and, on the other hand, those scholars who are attempting to engage the educational community in a post-tracking

discourse. *Becoming Good American Schools* is part of this latter effort (see also Cohen, 1994; Marsh & Raywid, 1994; Schurr, 1995). *The Tracking Wars*, along with Loveless's (1998) earlier pro-tracking report published by the Fordham Foundation, is part of the former. Within this tension lies an irony: In a society that is truly governed pursuant to the meritocratic criteria championed by folks such as Loveless, *Becoming Good American Schools* will earn the right to exert a more powerful influence on policy and practice than will *The Tracking Wars*.

Notes

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¹ Our own belief is that our research and values surely influence our normative, scientific, and historical frameworks and thus how we received these two books. By wrapping himself in the veil of scientific objectivity, Loveless refuses to acknowledge that *The Tracking Wars* reflects comparable influences.

Our ideas about the role of norms and politics in school reform are similar to those of Oakes. One of us has, in fact, worked with Oakes (see Welner & Oakes, 1996; Welner & Oakes, in press).

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