

extensive bibliography for further research. It also includes short descriptive profiles of the contributors.

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Mehan, H., Villaneuva, I, Hubbard, L, & Lintz, A. (1996). *Constructing school success: The consequences of untracking low achieving students*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 247 pp. (Softcover).

Over the past decade we have seen more and more attempts to bolster the academic success of low-achieving students and provide a more egalitarian school environment. Not surprisingly, we see academics from a variety of content areas supporting these revolutionary positions with evidence from each of their disciplines.

Evidence in this book arises from sociological and philosophical perspectives, as well as from critical theory and educational practice. The authors integrate a sometimes polemical approach to deconstruct an educational status quo which favors some and harms others. Unfortunately, because a curriculum approach was missing, the discussion lacks provision to support and sustain any reformed curriculum practices. So while we identified genuine methodological problems we lacked their correlating empirical solutions. This book offers however a significant first step in that direction. While the book is forceful in realistic portrayals of segregation and unequal access, the authors are also compassionate in their efforts to transform obstacles into opportunities for many disadvantaged students.

In the backdrop of an untracking program called Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), that places previously disadvantaged students in the same college prep classes as academically advantaged students, Mehan and colleagues allow us to see how low-achieving, low-income, and linguistic and ethnic minority students are successfully prepared for college within a more egalitarian school setting.

Through the AVID program students are motivated to change their lives and concentrate on learning to get ahead. AVID provides more opportunities for these students to enter and complete college requirements. Through comparing the AVID opportunities to the traditional tracking practices, we see how tracking robs many democratic rights from low-income, or ethnic minority students, whereas untracking decreases this differential treatment of students.

Unlike the hopelessness that accompany urgent pleas for emancipation and educational renewal in much of the earlier postmodernist movement, this book provides a positive and evolving argument for change. The book presents a progressive discussion and illustration of alternative paradigms. Its authors unfold a series of critical discourses ranging from admission that data is limited, to a more trenchant dismissal of past school reform attempts at a revised curriculum (p. 191).

Like the postmodernists they reference, however, the authors at times leave us with too few solutions about how a school might reform itself. They fail to include the specific roles of successful reformers. Instead, we are bombarded with the negatives of deficient reform movements since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983. Perhaps a more balanced approach would have synthesized research studies on good teaching. What about Thomas Kelly's (1991) conditions of effective schools. Kelly collected data from 3000 New York Schools, giving substance to reformed theoretic and practical advancements. As so many past postmodernist reform attempts cited in this book, the authors present an antihistorical battle march against the perceived enemy establishment, rather than a thoughtful follow through of their own unique and positive resolutions to the problem.

Vivid illustrations of practices that deny any possibility for equality, caused me to consider alternative institutional practices that might increase educational possibilities for the groups identified as disadvantaged. Unfortunately the book failed to highlight any such list, or to suggest specific approaches toward their own reform attempts. Alternatives were at times alluded to, but more often I found myself tangled in fuzzy concepts, or outmoded traditional use of significant terms. How do the authors define smart, for instance.

Clear definitions would have helped clarify key terms used to outline their problems or propose alternatives. For example the terms "dumb kids" and "made smart" (p. 230) are used without any hint of definition except to further the authors' argument for untracked schools. But if we accept traditional notions of "smart" and "dumb" which may have caused the need for

reform in the first place, there would be no problem. Since current studies in cognitive science, however, have challenged what it really means to be dumb or smart, we are left questioning whether the authors' definitions are traced from footsteps of traditional IQ scores. They are certainly not created from more current research in brain science. Definitions make a huge difference to how you read the book. If we are to discuss what factors trigger smartness and overcome dumbness, we must know what it means to be smart or dumb. While the book failed to distinguish, from every appearance the authors seemed to define these terms in very traditional outmoded concepts of intelligence.

The authors introduced students who are "made smart" through placement in successful classes and provided support systems to uphold them. An undercurrent of Vygotsky's constructivist learning approaches flows throughout the book. Also the accompanying notion that cultures are not static. They change. But if you are asking how do we respond to our increasingly pluralistic societies, in which we constantly face a conflict of goals, you will not find any response. In fact, considering the multiplicity of many school reform efforts, and the fact that we will always disagree over some goals, this book has not emphasized the research which suggest characteristics of effective schools.

This book is invaluable for its identification of the fact that we require fundamental change in school sorting practices which favor well-to-do white parents, and create ethnic and racial distance. While it identifies and analyzes oppression within current schools, and increases our awareness of the problems through an attempt at debate on the topic, further discussion might explore the richness of past reforms as an important point of departure on a search for resolutions. Like many books on reform, the book emphasizes and supports what we already know about how the school system has failed many, but then stops short of recommending curriculum remedies for the vicious cycle of low tracks, bureaucratic red tape, and outmoded school hierarchies. A curriculum component for the work could have added that one extra component, moving beyond exposure and traditional flaws to support substantive methodology reform that stands a chance at *Constructing School Success*.

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