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1

Tracking

Looking back, or looking casually from the outside in, the events of junior and senior high school appear like a complex but well-choreographed series of much-practiced and often-repeated steps. Each student performs a set routine, nearly if not completely identical to that of his schoolmates. Even the stumblings, bumpings, and confusions seem so predictable and occur with such regularity that chance alone cannot explain them. Day in and day out, the rhythm continues, the tight schedule of slow hours in class interrupted by the hurried frenzy of 5 or 7 or 9½ minutes between—a few noisy moments of juggling textbooks and notebooks stuffed with worksheets and answers to a string of questions at the end of some chapter, minutes of half-finished conversations, partly made plans—and then the rush to be somewhere else on time. In class there is the near-silent, almost attentive listening and the seemingly endless talk of teacher: “Get out your books. Yes, I said get out your books. Now open to page 73 . . . 73 . . . 73. Yes, that *was* page 73. Yes. Now, if you will take out some paper . . . yes, you’ll need a pencil. No, this won’t be handed in, but I’ll check it at the end of the period. Page 73. Could you put away your comb, please? Now, on page 73. . . .” Heads bent over books and answer sheets, students wait for the bell or for an interruption—a forgotten announcement, a call slip from the office, a fire drill, or some other break in the constant, repetitive motion. And of course there is daydreaming, meditation to the sweep of the sprinklers outside, sidelong glances at the hint of whiskers growing im-

perceptibly longer on a nearby adolescent chin, and the wondering if teachers go to bars after school or quietly slip into a closet after the last period and wait until morning.

There is learning, too. It seems as though everyone plows through geometric proofs, *Julius Caesar*, the causes of the Civil War, and the elements of the scientific method, but not with too much attention until just before exams. Some of us may even remember a handful of moments—not many, to be sure—when we forgot our adolescent selves enough to be absorbed in learning until the next bell sent us running to our lockers to get our smelly gym clothes before we missed the bus. And somehow things get learned and kids get smarter, test scores get better, essays get longer, problems get solved, constitutional amendments and the three branches of the federal government get memorized, leaves get labeled, frogs cut up, and on and on.

So it goes, year after year. School counselors, only semivisible most of the time, emerge periodically to sort through the maze of classes and students until somehow everyone has a class arranged for every hour for the following year. And so the dance continues with only slight variations on the dominant theme of sameness.

Isn't and wasn't it the same for everyone? Yes . . . and no.

This book is about schools and what students experience in them. More precisely, it is about twenty-five junior and senior high schools and about some of the experiences of 13,719 teenagers who attended those schools. A sameness permeated those experiences. Yet underneath this cloak of sameness the day-to-day lives of these students were quite different in some very important ways.

This book is about some of these differences in the experiences of the students and what the differences have to tell us about how secondary schooling operates in American society. The schools themselves were different: some were large, some very small; some in the middle of cities, some in nearly uninhabited farm country; some in the far West, the South, the urban North, and the Midwest. But the differences in what students experienced each day in these schools stemmed not so much from where they happened to live and which of the schools they happened to attend but, rather, from differences *within* each of the schools.

This book is about a schooling phenomenon called tracking and

how it both causes and supports differences in the lives of secondary students. Tracking is the process whereby students are divided into categories so that they can be assigned in groups to various kinds of classes. Sometimes students are classified as fast, average, or slow learners and placed into fast, average, or slow classes on the basis of their scores on achievement or ability tests. Often teachers' estimates of what students have already learned or their potential for learning more determine how students are identified and placed. Sometimes students are classified according to what seems most appropriate to their future lives. Sometimes, but rarely in any genuine sense, students themselves choose to be in "vocational," "general," or "academic" programs. In some schools students are classified and placed separately for each academic subject they take—fast in math, average in science; in other schools a single decision determines a student's program of classes for the entire day, semester, year, and perhaps even six years of secondary schooling. However it's done, tracking, in essence, is sorting—a sorting of students that has certain predictable characteristics.

First, students are identified in a rather public way as to their intellectual capabilities and accomplishments and separated into a hierarchical system of groups for instruction. Second, these groups are labeled quite openly and characterized in the minds of teachers and others as being of a certain type—high ability, low achieving, slow, average, and so on. Clearly these groups are not equally valued in the school; occasional defensive responses and appearances of special privilege—i.e., small classes, programmed learning, and the like for slower students—rarely mask the essential fact that they are less preferred. Third, individual students in these groups come to be defined by others—both adults and their peers—in terms of these group types. In other words, a student in a high-achieving group is seen as a high-achieving *person*, bright, smart, quick, and in the eyes of many, *good*. And those in the low-achieving groups come to be called slow, below average, and—often when people are being less careful—dummies, sweat-hogs, or yahoos. Fourth, on the basis of these sorting decisions, the groupings of students that result, and the way educators see the students in these groups, teenagers are treated by and experience schools very differently.

Many schools claim that they do not track students, but it is the rare school that has no mechanism for sorting students into groups that appear to be alike in ways that make teaching them seem easier. In fact,

this is exactly the justification some schools offer for tracking students. Educators strongly believe that students learn better in groups with others like themselves. They also believe that groups of similar students are easier to teach. This book is about these ideas and how they were played out in the lives of students at twenty-five schools.

This book is also about a very American notion called equality and how this ideal seems to be unwittingly subverted by tracking in schools. Most considerations of barriers to educational equality have focused on characteristics of students themselves as the source of the problem. Seen as products of disorganized and deteriorating homes and family structures, poor and minority children have been thought of as unmotivated, noncompetitive, and culturally disadvantaged. But there is another view. For in the tracking process, it seems the odds are not quite equal. It turns out that those children who seem to have the least of everything in the rest of their lives most often get less at school as well. Explored here are the ways in which the different experiences of these students reinforce the differences they experience outside the school. Those at the bottom of the social and economic ladder climb up through twelve years of "the great equalizer," Horace Mann's famous description of public schools, and end up still on the bottom rung.

This book is also about some fundamental changes needed in schooling. For there are some people—students, parents, teachers, administrators, school board members, and even legislators—who are aware of the seeming intractability of schools. They also see the relative futility of altering only one institution in a whole constellation of social forces that conspire to keep things the way they are. Even so, they say "we must do better." For these people, this book is written.

Intents and Effects

I was talking recently with a group of teachers, school administrators, and school board members about the practice of tracking in schools. During the course of the evening we were considering some of the reasons—historical, political, and educational—that seem to support the practice. At one point, a school board member stood up and said rather defensively, but also with considerable pride, that the *only* reason they tracked students in his school district was that they believed it was in the best interests of the students to do so. "No responsible person work-

ing with children in schools could have any other reason," he concluded. I believed him. And I agree that those who work with teenagers in secondary schools in this country, with very few exceptions, intend the very best for them. I believe that they want their students to achieve academically and to develop personally and socially in positive and healthy ways. I believe that they mean their students to become responsible and productive members of society. And I believe that what they do and what they have students do in school are intended to contribute toward these ends. But I also believe the old saying about where at least one road paved with good intentions can lead.

Tracking seems to be one of those well-intended pathways that, as we shall see throughout this book, has some pretty hellish consequences for many young people in schools. How can this happen? How can well-intentioned people, trained educators, participate in a process that turns out to affect many students in ways contrary to their intentions? How can they be part of a process that turns out not to be, despite the protestations of my friend the school board member, in the best interests of the students they work with?

I think one reason is that a lot of what we do in schools is done more or less out of habit stemming from traditions in the school's culture. These traditions dictate, for the most part, the ways in which schooling is organized and conducted. Many school practices seem to be the *natural* way to conduct schooling, an integral part of the way schools are. As a result we don't tend to think critically about much of what goes on. I don't mean to imply that these ways of schooling are not taken seriously. To the contrary, I think they are taken so seriously that we can hardly conceive of any alternatives to them. We have deep-seated beliefs and long-held assumptions about the appropriateness of what we do in schools. These beliefs are so ingrained in our thinking and behavior—so much a part of the school culture—that we rarely submit them to careful scrutiny. We seldom think very much about where practices came from originally and to what problems in schools they were first seen as solutions. We rarely question the view of the world on which practices are based—what humans are like, what society is like, or even what schools are for. We almost never reflect critically about the beliefs we hold about them or about the manifest and latent consequences that result from them. And I think that this uncritical, unreflective attitude gets us into trouble. It permits us to act in ways contrary to our intentions. In short,

it can lead us and, more important, our students down a disastrous road despite our best purposes.

Tracking is one of these taken-for-granted school practices. It is so much a part of how instruction is organized in secondary schools—and has been for as long as most of us can remember—that we seldom question it. We *assume* that it is best for students. But we don't very often look behind this assumption to the evidence and beliefs on which it rests.

I don't mean to imply by this that no one is concerned about grouping students. I think, in fact, that the contrary is true. School people usually spend a great deal of thought deciding what group students should be placed in. They want to make sure that placements are appropriate and fair. And further, what appear to be incorrect placements are often brought to the attention of teachers and counselors, usually with a great deal of concern. Adjustments sometimes need to be made. This is something we seem to want to be very responsible about. But this very concern over correct and fair placements underscores my point. In some way, we all know that what group or track a student is in makes a very real difference in his education. So at some level, we know that grouping is a very serious business. What we don't seem to question very much, however, is whether the practice of grouping students itself helps us achieve what we intend in schools. Most of us simply believe, as that school board member asserted, that it does.

Several assumptions seem to lend support to this belief. The first is the notion that students learn better when they are grouped with other students who are considered to be like them academically—with those who know about the same things, who learn at the same rate, or who are expected to have similar futures. This assumption is usually expressed in two ways: first, that bright students' learning is likely to be held back if they are placed in mixed groups and, second, that the deficiencies of slow students are more easily remediated if they are placed in classes together. Another assumption is that slower students develop more positive attitudes about themselves and school when they are not placed in groups with others who are far more capable. It is widely believed that daily classroom exposure to bright students has negative consequences for slower ones. A third assumption is that the placement processes used to separate students into groups both accurately and fairly reflect past achievements and native abilities. Part of this assumption too is that these placement decisions are appropriate for future learning.

either in a single class or for whole courses of study (e.g., academic or vocational). A fourth assumption is that it is easier for teachers to accommodate individual differences in homogeneous groups or that, in general, groups of similar students are easier to teach and manage.

There may be other assumptions at work here, but these are the premises in support of tracking practices I hear most often.

Well, what about these assumptions?

Because we base so much of what we do on them, it seems essential that they be carefully studied. Some can be examined by looking at empirical evidence from research studies. Others require thoughtful, reflective analyses with a historical perspective sensitive to the social and political context of school practice. All require critical examination in order to discover how our implicit thinking may be leading us to practices that are contrary to the ways in which we would *choose* to work with students. This is what we are about to do here.

Despite the fact that the first assumption—that students learn more or better in homogeneous groups—is almost universally held, it is simply not true. Or, at least, we have virtually mountains of research evidence indicating that homogeneous grouping doesn't consistently help *anyone* learn better. Over the past sixty years hundreds of studies have been conducted on the effects of ability grouping and tracking on student learning. These studies have looked at various kinds of groupings, measured different kinds of learning, and considered students at different ages and grades. The studies vary in their size and in their methodology. Some are quite sophisticated, some rather crude. The results differ in certain specifics, but one conclusion emerges clearly: no group of students has been found to benefit consistently from being in a homogeneous group. A few of the studies show that those students identified as the brightest learn more when they are taught in a group of their peers, and provided an enriched curriculum. However, most do not. Some studies have found that the learning of students identified as being average or low, has not been harmed by their placement in homogeneous groups. However, many studies have found the learning of average and slow students to be negatively affected by homogeneous placements.¹

The net result of all these studies of the relationship of tracking and academic outcomes for students is a conclusion contrary to the widely held assumptions about it. We can be fairly confident that bright students are *not* held back when they are in mixed classrooms. And we can

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be quite certain that the deficiencies of slower students are *not* more easily remediated when they are grouped together. And, given the evidence, we are unable to support the general belief that students learn best when they are grouped together with others like themselves.

The second assumption—that students, especially the slower ones, feel more positively about themselves and school when they are in homogeneous groups—includes a number of other premises as well. We often hear that classroom competition with bright students is discouraging to slower ones and may lead to lowered self-esteem, disruptive behavior, and alienation from school. Many who support tracking do so because they are convinced it will prevent these problems.

During the past twenty years, several researchers have investigated these claims. Once again, the evidence we have about the relationship between tracking and student attitudes and behaviors shows something quite different from what so many assume to be the case. A considerable amount of work, for example, has shown that students placed in average and low-track classes do *not* develop positive attitudes. Rather than help students to feel more comfortable about themselves, the tracking process seems to foster *lowered* self-esteem among these teenagers. Further exacerbating these negative self-perceptions are the attitudes of many teachers and other students toward those in the lower tracks. Once placed in low classes, students are usually seen by others in the school as dumb. Students in upper tracks, on the other hand, sometimes develop inflated self-concepts as a result of their track placements.² Closely related to students' self-evaluations are their aspirations for the future and the educational plans they make. Students in low-track classes have been found to have lower aspirations and more often to have their plans for the future frustrated.³ It is important to keep in mind at this point that much of the work in this area has controlled for other student characteristics—social class, ability, and pretrack enrollment attitudes—that otherwise might be seen as major contributors to these effects. In other words, low-track students do not seem to have lower self-concepts and aspirations or to inspire negative judgments in their peers and teachers simply because they are poorer or less bright than students in other tracks or because they themselves had more negative attitudes to begin with. While these things might be true, a good portion of the negative attitudes displayed by low-track students is attributable to the track placement itself.

Moreover, student behaviors have been found to be influenced by

track placement. Low-track students have been found to participate less in extracurricular activities at school, to exhibit more school and classroom misconduct, and to be involved more often in delinquent behavior outside of school. Lower-track students are more alienated from school and have higher drop-out rates.⁴ Again, these results have been obtained in studies that controlled for other student attributes that might confound the results. So we can conclude that, rather than alleviate attitude and behavior problems, as educators intend, tracking seems at least in part to contribute to them. Like the first assumption about students learning better, the second assumption about students feeling more positive about themselves and school seems to collapse under the research evidence.

The premises that student track placements are appropriate, accurate, and fair involve some fundamental considerations. To explore these fully, it is important to look both at the research evidence about them and at the logic on which they are based. First, however, it is necessary to look at the criteria by which students are placed. Almost universally, three kinds of information are taken into consideration, although in varying degrees at different schools. These three are scores on standardized tests, teacher and counselor recommendations (including 'grades'), and students' and their parents' choices.

It is important to realize that at least the first two pieces of information are believed to be a reflection of individual merit rather than of some inherited privilege. We want to believe that students who are placed in top groups are those who *deserve* to be there. In fact, the word *deserve* is often used when a student is seen to be misplaced or does not achieve up to what is expected in high tracks; he or she doesn't deserve to be there. So the criteria we use to classify and sort students are believed to assess their merit—their ability and especially past achievements—certainly not their race or ethnicity or socioeconomic position. And we also believe that these criteria are appropriate for students' future experience. As in the past when we have questioned the criteria for hiring or for voting to be sure they were not related to race, class, or gender but were directly relevant to the actual skills and knowledge required, we want to be sure that the criteria we use in tracking are not arbitrary and that they really relate to what students will be expected to do.

In 1970, when Findley and Bryan did a large survey of tracking practices in U.S. school districts, they found that 83 percent of the dis-

tricts surveyed used achievement and/or IQ tests as a basis for sorting students.⁵ Later studies have also found that aptitude and achievement test scores are a major determinant of track assignments.⁶ Given this heavy dependence on test scores, it is important to examine carefully the content, administration, and consequences of testing in relationship to the issues of fairness and merit.

Standardized tests are very useful devices for sorting students into ability or achievement groups. They are constructed to do just that. The tests are comprised of items that separate people in terms of their responses. Those items that everyone answers the same way—either right or wrong—are eliminated from the tests during their construction. In other words, the things that everyone is likely to know, or not know, do not appear on tests. Only those things that some people know and others do not are there. This makes the results of the tests quite predictable. Test results, then, make a group of individuals appear to be different on whatever dimension the test is measuring—an aptitude, general intelligence, or achievement in a particular subject area. Sorting people according to their differences in these respects becomes very easy.

What needs to be remembered here is that differences that appear to be substantial according to test results may, in fact, be relatively minor given the universe of knowledge or skill a test purports to measure. Take a standardized test of seventh- and eighth-grade reading achievement, for example. In designing such a test, as many as 60 percent of the items initially considered to be good indicators of reading achievement may have to be eliminated if it turns out—as it often does—that nearly all the seventh- and eighth-graders in the pilot group can answer them. Only those items are kept that a substantial number of these students miss. We have no guarantee that those items that are kept are the best determinants of reading achievement per se. We know only that they best separate students along a continuum of low to high scores. We cannot even be sure that the content of the test matches the curricular objectives of the instruction students may encounter. Moreover, we do know that this process tends to make tests that are labeled achievement tests actually tests of general ability.

The differences in actual (not measured) reading achievement, then, may be relatively quite small. And yet we are willing to judge a student's level of achievement and, consequently, determine the kind of education he or she is provided on the basis of these test scores. Part of this will-

ingness can be understood when we consider the self-fulfilling prophecy of the normal curve. No matter what, half of the population is below the mean, below average. We really need to rethink whether this way of looking at human learning potential squares with recent and mounting evidence that, under appropriate instructional conditions, more than 90 percent of students can master course material.⁷ Nevertheless, we continue to interpret large test-score differences to mean large absolute differences which demand large educational differences. And usually this happens without our being very much aware of the process that has taken place. We need, I think, to question seriously whether these relative differences are appropriate criteria for separating students for instruction.⁸

A second issue is the fairness of tests. Are scores in fact based solely on meritocratic factors—achievement and aptitude—or are they based in part on students' race, social class, or economic position? One way to answer this question is to look at the issues of test content and test administration. Many researchers who have done so have concluded that both the substance of most standardized tests and the procedures used to standardize and administer them are culturally biased. That is, white middle-class children are most likely to do well on them because of the compatibility of their language and experiences with the language and content of test questions, with the group against which the tests were normed, with testing procedures, and with most of the adults doing the testing. Lower-class and minority youngsters are less likely to do well because of their language and experience differences. Attempts to develop "culture-fair" tests and testing procedures have not been very successful.⁹

The consequences of testing, however, constitute the most damning evidence against the fairness of tests. Poor and minority students consistently score lower than do whites. This result assumes special significance when considering tests that attempt to measure innate abilities or what we sometimes call native intelligence. We could judge such tests as fair only if poor and minority youngsters were less capable than middle- and upper-middle-class whites. And despite some claims of a small group of researchers about a relationship between race and IQ, we simply do not have evidence that such a relationship exists.¹⁰ What we can be quite sure of, in fact, is that the ability to learn is normally distributed among and within social groups. This is exactly the position the

courts have taken in regard to the placement of black students in special-education classes in California schools. Placement strategies that result in the disproportionate assignment of minority children to special-education programs are considered a denial of the equal protection and due process guaranteed under the Constitution.¹¹

One other point should be emphasized here. This view of testing deficiencies is not a rare view held only by a few quibblers at universities. Many of those people who are most centrally involved in the area of educational measurement have the same concerns. A recent issue of *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice* was devoted to a discussion of problems with ability testing, especially in regard to their use in sorting students.¹² Nor are these worries merely esoteric. Principals, counselors, and teachers are, more often than not, aware of some of the deficiencies of testing. But the habit of tracking is so ingrained they shrug off the problems for lack of a better way to preserve the practice.

But tests are not the only means by which students are sorted into track levels. Most districts report that counselor and teacher recommendations are used either as supplements to or in place of test scores. Are these recommendations accurate, appropriate, and fair? Are they likely to counter the biases in tests? Unfortunately, we have little hard evidence about how these recommendations are made or about what factors actually influence these subjective judgments. We expect, however, that school people will accurately judge educational capabilities—both aptitude and achievement—when making placement decisions. In fact, we expect them to do more than this. We expect them to be able to determine what life course is most appropriate for different students, and we expect them to make these difficult judgments for a great number of students each year. Counselors may have 300 to 500 students to place—many of whom they barely know. Teachers often have more than 150 students to recommend. What's more, we assume that these decisions can be accurately made under these circumstances about children as young as eleven years in many school districts and not older than thirteen in most.

What information we do have about the process of teacher and counselor guidance leads us to believe that these judgments are certainly no more accurate or fair than test scores. In 1963 a study of counseling practices revealed that students were often placed into groups on the basis of counselors' assessment of their language, dress, and behav-

ior as well as their academic potential.¹³ We do not know how widespread this practice is. But even if it is widespread, the degree to which counselors and teachers are aware of these influences has not been investigated. My hunch is that, given the circumstances of placement decisions, factors often influenced by race and class—dress, speech patterns, ways of interacting with adults, and other behaviors—often do affect subjective judgments of academic aptitude and probably academic futures, and that educators allow this to happen quite unconsciously. We know that these kinds of recommendations often result in more disproportionate placements of students from various racial groups and social classes than do placements by test scores alone. Poor and minority kids end up more often in the bottom groups; middle- and upper-class whites more often are at the top.¹⁴ Again, we are left with serious questions about the appropriateness or fairness of one of the major criteria for student placement.

The third criterion often used is student or parent choice. Often students at the senior high school level are asked to indicate whether they prefer a curriculum leading to college entrance, one leading toward a vocation immediately following high school, or a more general course (not leading to college). Although these choices are made by students themselves, Rosenbaum has pointed out that they are not made free of influence.¹⁵ They are informed choices—informed by the school guidance process and by the other indicators of what the appropriate placement is likely to be. Students and parents are informed by test scores and by the recommendations of counselors and teachers. Given what we know about these two sources of information, how can their choices possibly be seen as free or uncontaminated?

* This discussion leads to the following conclusion: Thinking carefully about the processes involved in placing students in track levels and examining what evidence we have about the results must make us seriously question the traditional assumptions; we cannot safely say that track placements can be counted on to be accurate, appropriate, or even fair.

The fourth assumption—that teaching is easier (with respect to both meeting individual needs and managing classroom instruction in general) when students are in homogeneous groups—may be a little more difficult to set aside. Most teachers undoubtedly have some solid experience that tells them that this is true. And as long as we confine our

considerations to the way instruction is usually conducted, I would have to agree. But I hope that by the end of this book you will be convinced of two things: First, there may be some ways of conducting instruction that make working with heterogeneous groups manageable. I cannot suggest anything quite as easy as working only with the top kids, but I think there are some instructional strategies that make heterogeneity in a classroom a positive instructional resource. Further, I hope to convince you that even if tracking students so that teachers can work with homogeneous groups is easier, it is not worth the educational and social price we pay for it.

The Gulf Between

We have seen some fairly convincing evidence that tracking students does not accomplish what school people intend. We have also critically examined the assumptions on which tracking is based that support these good intentions. Careful analysis calls these assumptions into serious question. At the very least, we would be foolish to continue to hold these assumptions and base our practices on them as if they were common sense. Reflection on these matters is in order and in fact long overdue.

What we have seen, in essence, is that there exists a substantial gulf between intentions and effects in the matter of tracking students in schools. Some of what comprises that gulf is explored in the remainder of this book. We will look carefully at the actual experiences students have in classes at different track levels in a group of American junior and senior high schools. We will survey what content and skills they are taught, what instructional procedures their teachers use, and what their classroom relationships are like. We will consider how they feel about themselves, their classes, the subjects they are studying, their schools, and their own educational futures. We will also consider the implications of this for questions of educational quality and equality for all American secondary school students. And we will look at some different ways of schooling, which include approaches to incorporating and accommodating individual differences in classrooms. We will consider some ways that might help us do better. But first we will consider how all this got started in American schooling—the historical events that gave rise to tracking and the explanations theorists give of these events.

2

Unlocking the Tradition

Well, you may ask, if tracking is as bad as the evidence seems to indicate, why do we continue to do it? One reason takes us back to the discussion in chapter 1 about the power of tradition in the decisions schools make about how to organize and conduct the business of teaching and learning. Tracking, as we noted, like many practices in schools, emerged as a solution to a specific set of educational and social problems at a particular time in history. And, like many such “solutions,” it has become part of what is considered to be the ordinary way to conduct schooling. As a result, the practice has continued long after the original problems arose and long after the social context from which the solution emerged has changed considerably. In short, the practice of tracking has become *traditional*.

We need to lift tracking above this taken-for-granted level in order to reflect critically about whether it is appropriate, given today’s educational problems, today’s social context, and today’s students—in short, we need to unlock the tradition. By placing tracking in its historical and social context, we can better understand what it is. This information, too, is essential for a careful consideration of whether it is something we want to continue.

We have to go back about one hundred years to trace the development of ability grouping and tracking in American schools. Before 1860, free public elementary schools were established in only a small portion of the country, principally in the more prosperous areas of New England

with markedly different opportunities to learn. It is in these ways that schools exacerbate the differences among the students who attend them. And it is through tracking that these educational differences are most blatantly carried out.

6

Classroom Climate

Certainly a great deal more happens in secondary school classrooms than the presentation of curricular content and the creation of opportunities for students to learn. Day after day thirty or so teenagers are grouped together in a relatively small boxlike space. One adult, the teacher, is charged with an almost unbelievably difficult task. He or she must first of all keep the group physically confined to its space. There must be order and usually quiet. And further, the teenagers there are expected to spend their time learning—learning what someone else has decided is important for them. Often what is to be learned would not rank high on a list of what the teenagers themselves would say is interesting or important to them. They might not choose to consider the topics and skills of their courses at all if left to their own devices.

We usually take all this for granted. Rarely do we step back to consider what a huge and difficult task teachers are expected to do. Nor do we think much about the substantial degree of cooperation and willingness to go along with what others expect of them adolescents demonstrate in their participation in classrooms. Essentially, we have in every classroom, even in "high-achieving" classrooms, a mutual process of teacher coercion and student compliance. But, as we all know, this process is manifested in very different ways in different classrooms. Some teachers coerce in subtle, almost invisible ways—which quickly give way to mutual, cooperative, positive interrelating—and others in an obviously authoritarian style. Some groups of students seem to be eager and enthusiastic participants. Others are clearly recalcitrant.

Involved in this process, certainly, is the quality of the relationships that develop between students and their teacher. Part of it too is the way the students feel about being with one another in class. And clearly the kind of roles students are expected to play in the learning process—whether they are expected to be actively engaged or passively receptive in their compliance with the learning activity—is involved as well. All these elements help to create the feeling tone of the classroom, the general atmosphere—what many have called the classroom climate.

A great deal of student and teacher attention and energy is spent on these aspects of classroom life—the feelings students have about what's going on, the kind of involvement they have with learning activities, and the kinds of relationships that develop among those who are together day after day. These elements may not be as obviously related to learning outcomes as is the knowledge that is presented or the time spent in learning activity or the quality of instruction in a classroom. But we all have an intuitive sense of how important feelings, involvement, relationships, and other elements of our environments are to all of us. The climate or atmosphere of the places we inhabit strongly influences what most of us do in them. This is certainly no less true in classrooms than it is anywhere else.

This chapter will consider some aspects of classroom climate—why they are important and how they were manifested in different track levels at our twenty-five schools. As with the curricular contents and the kinds of learning opportunities students had available to them, considerable differences were found in the quality of relationships and type of student involvement that characterized high- and low-track classes. In addition to describing these differences, we will look closely at what they are likely to mean to students in terms of their learning outcomes, how they might influence the ways students come to see themselves in relationship to social institutions, and how they are likely to affect the quality of everyday school life for students. These things will be related, as were students' access to knowledge and learning opportunities in earlier chapters, to the larger question of educational and social equality. For here again, what we discovered about how the quality of classroom life differed for high- and low-track classes in our sample adds to the growing picture of unequal educational experiences in these twenty-five American schools.

About the Climate of Classrooms

Realizing that the quality of life in institutional environments is likely to be important in terms of both what is accomplished and how people feel about being in those environments, some social scientists have begun to study institutional climates. A substantial amount of this work has focused on education environments—on both schools as educational institutions and classrooms as learning environments.

The climate of classrooms has been thought of by many of these researchers as the social and psychological forces that influence the social environment of the whole group and subgroups within classes.¹ These social and psychological forces have been seen as comprising three distinct but interacting dimensions. First are the relationships that develop in classroom life. This dimension includes how supportive teachers are of students, how students work together, the degree of affiliation or friendship they feel for one another, and finally, the way students participate in classroom activities. The second dimension is the goal-orientation and personal-development features of environments, which are generally thought of in classrooms as the task or academic orientation that exists there. The third dimension, the system-maintenance and change dimension, includes the degree to which classrooms are orderly and organized, how control is maintained in them, how much students are involved in classroom planning, and the amount of unusual and varying activities that occur there.²

We considered some of these features of class climate in chapter 5. Certainly the clarity of classroom organization and procedures and the task orientation of both teachers and students, which differed so markedly in high- and low-track classes, are a part of classroom climate. In this chapter our focus will turn to the relationship dimension of classrooms and to the kinds of involvement students have in their learning experiences. Before we look at the data, however, we need to consider the research done on the impact of climate on students. What evidence or theory do we have about its importance generally? Does it *really* matter what relationships in classrooms are like? What difference is it likely to make if students are more or less involved in what goes on? We will look at these questions in two ways. First we will consider how different classroom climates relate to academic student outcomes; then we will

consider how different climates might affect the quality of life in schools for teenagers and in the adult social settings they may encounter in the future.

There is considerable evidence that differences in classroom climates do account for substantial differences in student learning. Several studies in a variety of subject areas have clearly established the relationship between particular psychological and social aspects of classroom life and student achievement in those subjects. For example, one rather comprehensive study of secondary classrooms in several subject areas (including physics, chemistry, biology, geography, mathematics, English literature, history, and French) found that, even when the measured intelligence of students was controlled, more learning took place in classes with a greater degree of intimacy among all classroom participants and an accompanying lack of cliquishness and friction among them. Also important in student learning were a lack of perceived teacher favoritism and the existence of a generally democratic atmosphere. Additionally, students in the classes where more learning occurred were considerably less apathetic about their class experiences.³

What might account for these results? Going beyond our intuitive notion that how we feel about the people and places that surround us must influence what we do, R. P. McDermott, in a provocative *Harvard Educational Review* article a few years ago, suggested some useful explanations for just how and why classroom interactions—one important aspect of climate—may serve to either enhance or limit students' learning.⁴

McDermott's explanations are not mere speculation but are based on an intensive study of classrooms in a variety of school systems. He first reminds us that, as was discussed in the previous chapter, environments that most enhance learning are those in which children are clear about what they are to do and have enough time to complete learning tasks. McDermott suggests that the interactions and relationships that are present in the classroom affect both the availability of time and students' understanding of tasks. The kinds of interactions that take place determine whether students and teachers develop what he calls "trusting relations," relations in which both teacher and students interpret what others in the classroom do as being "directed to the best interests of what they are trying to do together and [understand] how they can hold each other accountable for any breach of the formulated consen-

sus."⁵ In other words, trusting relations exist when teachers and students see one another as mutually involved and working at the project of learning. In classrooms where trusting relations exist, students will spend their time and energy on learning. Where they do not exist, a great deal of time will be spent trying to get organized and negotiating relationships. Much of the teacher's time and energy is likely to be devoted to establishing rewards and punishments to get students to attend to tasks. Much of the students' time and energy is likely to be devoted to not working and disrupting what the teacher is attempting to do. If McDermott is correct, his propositions go a long way toward explaining why students' perceptions of teacher support and concern are related not only to organized, task-oriented classrooms but to learning outcomes themselves.

It seems reasonable to extend McDermott's conceptualization of trusting relations and their impact on learning to involve all the inhabitants of the classroom. If the students in the classroom trust one another as cooperating participants in the learning enterprise, they will be likely to spend more of their time together on intellectual tasks than on relationship issues among them. This certainly is consistent with the findings cited earlier, that classrooms in which there is a high degree of affiliation and a lack of friction seem to be those in which students learn more.

This line of thinking is especially useful because it enables us to conclude with some confidence that positive classroom relations are something more than a nice accompaniment to learning. Good classroom relations enhance student learning. This is not to say that the quality of everyday life in classrooms is important only insofar as it affects learning. Indeed, the kinds of relationships students experience daily in schools are tremendously important in themselves. But it certainly helps us to understand the interrelatedness of all aspects of schooling to see how classroom relationships may be directly connected to the learning process.

Of course, academic achievement is not the only kind of student outcome likely to be influenced by the classroom atmosphere. We would certainly expect that the climate of classes, and particularly the relationship dimension, would strongly influence outcomes in the affective area as well, such as how students feel about themselves and their school experience. Some research has been done in these areas that suggests

that student satisfaction is likely to be higher in classrooms where students are more involved, where students actively participate in a variety of activities, and where personal relationships are positive. Further, there is some indication that in classes with less friction and student apathy interest in the subject area is increased.⁶ We will look in depth at student attitudes such as these in chapter 7. At that point, we will be able to suggest some relationships between classroom environments and student outcomes in the affective area from the data collected about our twenty-five schools. Generally, however, the evidence we have from other work that has been done suggests most strongly that "satisfying human relationships tend to facilitate personal growth and development. . . . Objective behavioral and performance effects seem to depend on a combination of warm and supportive relationships, an emphasis on specific directions of personal growth, and a reasonably clear, orderly and well-structured milieu."⁷

There is another type of student outcome that has been speculated about but not thoroughly investigated in relationship to specific aspects of the classroom environment. This concerns the socialization of students for participation as adults in the larger society. To explore this aspect further we need to turn for a moment to a much discussed interpretation of the function of schooling in relation to the preservation of the structure of economic and social life in the United States.

In 1976, two political economists, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, published an explosive book, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, which put forth a radical criticism of the U.S. education system.⁸ A key part of this critique was a hypothesis about how the sorting and selection among students that go on in schools in this country and the differences that students experience in the kinds of educational environments that result can be directly linked to the preservation of the social, economic, and political inequality that exists in our society.

In their analysis of schools as agents in the reproduction of the inequalities in the American economic system, Bowles and Gintis focus a major part of their discussion on the school's reinforcement of the social-class differences children bring with them to school and on the different kinds of socialization children from various social classes receive there. An essential element in their perspective of schooling is that groups of students, sorted (as we have seen) largely on race and class differences, receive different treatments that result in differences not only in aca-

dem ic outcomes but in nonacademic outcomes as well. In fact, to Bowles and Gintis, even more important than the differences expected in the type and quantity of knowledge acquired by students in various educational settings are the differences expected in students' attitudes toward institutional structures, toward themselves, and toward their anticipated roles in adult society. In other words, in preparing students for their lives in the real world, schools must socialize students in very particular ways. This socialization must include how students feel about themselves, about schools, and what they can expect in the future. Also important, not all students can feel that they are competent, that they have unlimited potential, and that they can play a leadership role in the institutions they encounter. Some students must come to feel in quite the opposite way. These differences in attitudes, Bowles and Gintis believe, make possible the continuance of a social and economic system in this country that is characterized by unequal and undemocratic structures which go largely unquestioned.

By socializing children differently, largely reinforcing the values and personality characteristics of the social class of their families, schools, Bowles and Gintis assert, prepare students to meet the demands of the occupations they are expected to assume within the existing class structure. Lower-class students are expected to assume lower-class jobs and social positions as adults. Middle- and upper-class children are likewise expected to follow in their parents' footsteps. This socialization is accomplished through what Bowles and Gintis label "the close correspondence between the social relationships which govern personal interaction in the work place and the social relationships of the educational system."⁹ The social relationships and interactions in schools and classrooms, by imitating the social relationships in various work settings, produce different kinds of future workers by fragmenting students into stratified groups wherein capabilities, attitudes, and behaviors that are appropriate for different work environments are rewarded. These school and classroom relationships serve to tailor "the self-concepts, aspirations, and social class identifications of individuals to the requirements of the social division of labor."¹⁰ Thus, they claim, the educational system turns lower-class children into lower-class workers. These workers will be subordinate to external control and alienated from the institutions but willing to conform to the needs of the work place, to a large extent because of the way they were treated in school. Additionally, Bowles and Gintis

through original source - Gintis & Bowles to McDonald
Lower track classes - Gintis & Bowles



suggest that the absence of close interpersonal relationships is characteristic of both lower-class work environments and classroom environments for lower-class children. In contrast, upper- and middle-class students, destined for upper-status and middle-level positions in the economic hierarchy, are more likely to experience social relationships and interactions that promote active involvement, affiliation with others, and the internalization of rules and behavioral standards. Self-regulation is the goal here rather than the coercive authority and control seen as appropriate for the lower class.

Recently, others have elaborated this "correspondence" view in work that begins to explain more precisely how classroom interactions may lead to these ends.¹¹ Rather than seeing students as basically passive, submissive recipients of school socialization, these closer looks at classroom interaction point out that students, especially lower-class students, often actively resist what schools try to teach them. These students openly reject both the behaviors schools expect and the content they value. By doing so, students challenge the control schools have over them. The existence of student resistance, however, does not contradict Bowles and Gintis's view of the role and function of schools in reproducing the work force. To the contrary, it explains how this happens in a way consistent with what we know about how many low-achieving students behave. The act of resisting what schools offer is part of how social and economic reproduction occurs.

For example, Paul Willis's ethnographic account of working-class boys in an English comprehensive secondary school, *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, shows in interesting detail how this struggle between school and students takes place. By finding ways to leave the classroom, to smoke, to divert or subvert teachers' agendas, to disrupt routines and break rules, the boys in Willis's study assert some measure of control over the school and classroom environment. But with their rejection of the values and expected behaviors of their school, the boys also reject school learning—or any form of "mental" as opposed to "manual" work. Thus they see industrial work as desirable and appropriate for them. Willis also suggests that the resistance behaviors are an important part of learning to become low-level workers as these behaviors are what will make work life tolerable for them in the future.

The production of lower-class workers from lower-class students,

then, can be seen as more complicated than the simple kind of correspondence between the school environment and the work place Bowles and Gintis's work might suggest. It stems not only from the differential treatment the school offers students but also from the kinds of responses students make to it. This interaction becomes the reproductive force through which the differential socialization of students is accomplished.

Following Bowles and Gintis and Willis, classes at different track or ability levels, because of the different kinds of students they serve in terms of their backgrounds, would be the logical places to accomplish this differential socialization. We wanted to look at our data in light of this possibility, to explore whether what happens in low-track classes functions to socialize students from lower groups toward passivity; institutional relationships characterized by dominance, coercion, and distance; and alienation from the educational environment. Conversely, we wanted to examine whether relationships and interactions in high-track classes were of the type that might help to socialize students toward more active involvement, institutional relationships characterized by greater warmth and concern, and greater affiliation with the learning experience. If these conditions did exist, that would suggest that tracking in schools does serve to reinforce and reproduce the inequities in the larger society by limiting some students' participation in the educational experience.

There is an interesting similarity between those classroom characteristics that Bowles and Gintis suggest promote socialization for upper-status positions and those that others have found are related to greater student learning. Those aspects of classroom climate that appear to lead to socialization for lower-class occupations also seem to be those found in classes where students learn less. Taking the research and theory together, then, we can begin to appreciate the importance of the psychosocial dimensions of classrooms. Once again, differences in these dimensions seem very likely to be linked to tracking and ultimately to unequal educational experiences for students in various tracks—with environments for students at the bottom less conducive to student learning and more likely to channel students into the lowest social and economic positions as adults. With these powerful possibilities in mind, we turn now to the data we have about the climates of our Study of Schooling classrooms.

Relationships and Involvements in Twenty-five Schools

The study collected data on several important aspects of classroom relationships and student involvement from student questionnaires, teacher questionnaires, and the reports of outside observers. From the student questionnaires, scales were developed that measured such features as the teacher's concern for students, the teacher's punitiveness, the amount of disruption and dissonance in the classroom, student apathy, and the regard students had for one another, to name just a few. Both the teacher questionnaires and the observation reports gave us information about the time teachers spent disciplining students and the kind of involvement students were likely to have in classroom activities. All these data help us to unravel what the quality of classroom environments was like. And of course, we were most curious to see whether track levels were different along these lines. Our analyses showed that indeed they were.

Additionally, when we interviewed the teachers about their classes, we asked them to describe the climates they perceived. Their answers were varied as the teachers tended to interpret *climate* in a number of ways. Many teachers' comments, however, did speak to the issues we are concerned with here. Some of them were quite consistent with what the students in various groups said about their classes.

Teacher-Student Relationships

There is a tremendous rapport between myself and the students. The class is designed to help the students in college freshman English composition. This makes them receptive. It's a very warm atmosphere. I think they have confidence in my ability to teach them well, yet because of the class size—32—there are times they feel they are not getting enough individualized attention.

Teacher, High-track English—senior high

I had *one* worse class than this.

Teacher, Low-track Science—senior high

This is an *especially* warm and congenial group—towards each other and towards me. Logically because of age. Warmth towards them shows—we tease each other—I give much praise, extra credits, etc. If you are open and warm with them it is returned to you. Students and teachers are together trying to change a crowded, noisy, unattractive classroom into a nice place. Working on it together. Very high student enthusiasm—very involved.

Teacher, High-track Math—junior high

This is my worst class. Kids very slow—underachievers and they don't care. I have no discipline cases because I'm very strict with them and they are scared to cross me. They couldn't be called enthusiastic about math—or anything, for that matter.

Teacher, Low-track Math—junior high

Overall a good feeling between teacher and pupils—type of students you can joke with. When you get serious 95% respond. Very few discipline problems—eager to learn for most part.

Teacher, High-track Math—junior high

They don't like me in a position of authority. These children don't like anybody in authority.

Teacher, Low-track English—senior high

Bright, enthusiastic, I had them two years ago for French and that helped. Relaxed, informal atmosphere about it. I like it because I don't have to be mean to keep them under control. In some other classes I have to keep it structured all period long, every day.

Teacher, High-track Foreign Language—junior high

My students are *made* to respect me and obey me. I make them work and learn or get out of the program.

Teacher, Low-track Vocational Education—junior high

We carefully analyzed all our information that concerned relationships between teachers and students in our 299 English and mathematics classes. We looked first at how teachers' concern for students was perceived by the students. To measure this dimension we asked the students to indicate their agreement or disagreement with a series of eight statements:

The teacher makes this class enjoyable for me.

The teacher listens to me.

The teacher lets me express my feelings.

I like the teacher in this class.

I wish I had a different teacher for this class.

I feel the teacher is honest with me.

This teacher is friendly.

The teacher is fair to me.

The teacher-punitiveness scale and the measures used to assess how much class time was spent on teachers getting students to behave were also used to get a picture of what teacher-student relationships were like in the classrooms. The punitiveness scale, as you will recall from chapter 5, included statements about the teacher making fun of students, hurting students' feelings, punishing unfairly, and creating fear in students.

The measures used to assess time were reports by teachers, students, and observers about how time was spent. We also were interested in what evidence observers could find of overtly negative or positive interactions of teachers and their students. On the positive side, this evidence included teachers' use of humor, positive touching, or expressions of enthusiasm. On the negative side, observers noted when teachers made demeaning, punishing, or angry remarks, used negative touching, or gave other overtly negative expressions.

Taken together, this information gives us an overall look at teacher-student relationships at various track levels. The following patterns emerged. Both the students' perceptions of their relationships with teachers and the measures of time spent on discipline or behavior problems turned out to be different in important ways in classes at different track levels. High-track classes saw their teachers as more concerned about them and less punitive toward them than did classes in the low track. And, as we saw clearly in chapter 5, teachers, students, and observers in high-track classes all reported that less time was spent on behavior and discipline than did those in low-track classes. Average classes were almost halfway between the high and low tracks on this set of measures. Interestingly, observers saw almost no evidence of teachers being either openly negative or openly positive in any of the track levels.

It's important to be aware that students in every track level tended to agree at least mildly that their teachers were concerned about them. Similarly, teachers in general were not seen as very punitive. Consistent with this finding is that classroom observers saw little evidence of overtly negative behavior on the part of teachers. Classrooms were for the most part what we might call flat in their emotional tone. They appeared, in large part, to be pretty neutral places. Yet even within this overall flatness, our time and student-perception data show that something markedly different was occurring in different track levels. And these track-related differences were fairly consistent across classes within each of the track levels. Relationships between teachers and students were definitely more positive in high-track classes; relationships were clearly more negative in the low.

Student-Peer Relationships

Students interact warmly and cooperation exists—few conflicts in class.

Teacher, High-track Vocational Education—junior high

They can be friends one day and seemingly hate each other the next. They tattale on each other—put the other person down.

Teacher, Low-track English—junior high

Very good climate. Good rapport among students. Students have a lot of fun in class.

Teacher, High-track Science—senior high

They pick on each other more than kids in average classes. They are more prone to violence—I observe—but I've not had trouble.

Teacher, Low-track English—junior high

The black and white kids do not get along in this class. They sit on different sides of the room. They attack each other verbally and they're not kidding around. Basically the blacks call the whites rednecks—poor crackers—put them down. The blacks control the class. They are in the majority—about 20, only 10 or 11 white. Sometimes they will start fighting and I have to break it up. The whites are lower socioeconomic and the blacks are too. This is deep seated and comes from home and I'm sure they don't associate in any other classes or anywhere in school. Their achievement levels are about the same.

Teacher, Low-track Science—junior high

Class is close-knit group (many know each other). Not a formal atmosphere.

Teacher, High-track Math—junior high

Generally, they have low self-esteem. They take it out on each other.

Teacher, Low-track English—senior high

Students have a lot of conflicts in their interactions and when a student is upset they vocalize it.

Teacher, Low-track Science—junior high

The climate is superb. Peer-to-peer climate is great. I get on with these children and have no problems. There is a lot of understanding and support at this particular class.

Teacher, High-track Math—junior high

Kids can't stand each other, too many emotional problems to listen.

Teacher, Low-track Science—junior high

We used five different pieces of information to find out about the relationships students had with one another and how they felt about being with their classmates. First, we used four of the scales that measured students' perceptions of their classrooms. All looked at relationships among students directly, but each focused on a slightly different aspect of those relationships.

Student agreement or disagreement with the following seven statements helped us determine how much they seemed to like and help one

1. Relationship w/teacher
2. Relationship w/ classmates

another. Taken together, these statements may be seen as a measure of peer esteem:

I help my classmates with their work.
 If I am absent, my classmates help me to catch up on what I missed.
 I like my classmates.
 I like working with other students in this class.
 In this class, people care about me.
 If I had trouble with my work, most of my classmates would help me.
 My classmates like me.

Three sets of statements helped us get an idea of how students got along in the classroom. First, three statements were used as a measure of classroom dissonance:

The students in this class fight with each other.
 The students in this class argue with each other.
 Students in this class yell at each other.

Second, three statements measured the degree of cliquishness among students in classrooms:

Some groups of students refuse to mix with the rest of the class.
 Certain students stick together in small groups.
 When we work in small groups, many students work only with their close friends.

And third, four statements were used to help us find out how much competition was a part of student relationships in their classrooms:

There is a lot of competition in this class.
 In this class, students compete with each other for good grades.
 When I'm in this class, I feel I have to do better than other students.
 Students in this class feel they have to do better than each other.

One other statement elicited students' responses about how friendly they thought their classmates were:

Students in the class are unfriendly to me.

Among these indicators of the kinds of relationships students had, only the measures of cliquishness among students revealed no important differences among track levels.

Most important of the differences at different track levels were the feelings reported about the friendliness among students in class. Students in low-track classes, far more than those in the high tracks, told us that they felt that other students in the class were unfriendly to them.

Large differences were also found in the amount of angry and hostile interactions that were reported among students in class. Low-track students indicated that considerably more arguing, yelling, and fighting with one another took place in their classes. Substantial differences were also found in the warm, helpful feelings students had about one another. High-track students far more often agreed that their classmates really liked one another and were willing to extend help. Low-track students told us that these kinds of things were much less a part of their classroom experience. Again, average classes fell between the high and low tracks on these characteristics.

There were track-level differences in the competitiveness of classes as well, but these differences were much smaller and less consistent. For example, in English classes both high- and low-track classes indicated that a moderate degree of competition occurred, and average classes reported slightly less. In math classes, high-track classes were the most competitive, average classes the next most, and low classes the least. While these differences in competitiveness were statistically important, they were much less so than the other differences in student relationships. What stands out as most dramatic are the people-to-people interactions that took place. Clearly, the classes in the lowest track were considerably more hostile and unfriendly places. Students could not count to the same extent on help from others or even on their general good will. Overtly hostile exchanges were certainly more frequent.

Student Involvement

We wanted to investigate as many aspects of the involvement dimension of class climate as possible. How involved did students seem to be in what was happening in class? How *involving* were the learning activities that were available to them? Were students expected to be active or passive participants in what went on in class? What were the impressions of trained observers about how involved students were?

We gathered students' perceptions of their own involvement and feelings about it with three measures. One was the following set of statements, which indicated their willingness to go along with what was happening in class—in essence, their degree of compliance with what was expected of them:

I usually do my homework.
 I usually do the work assigned in this class.

The students in this class usually do the work assigned. I usually do everything my teacher tells me to do.

A second set of statements told us how much students seemed to care about how well they did in class. This set asked them to tell us about their feelings, whereas the previous set focused on their behaviors. We considered this set of statements a measure of student apathy:

Failing in this class would not bother most of the students.
Most of the students pay attention to the teacher.
Students don't care about what goes on in this class.
I don't care about what goes on in this class.

A third measure we used was the following statement:
I feel left out of class activities.

This helped us gain insight into how much students might feel excluded from involvement. It also gave us clues about feelings of hurt or alienation students might have experienced in their classes.

We used information from the teacher survey to determine whether students were being given opportunities to be actively involved in their learning. We divided a list of possible classroom activities into active and passive types. It was our belief that students would feel more involved if learning activities elicited active rather than passive participation from them. We categorized the following activities as more active: going on field trips; doing research; writing reports, stories, or poems; having class discussions; building or drawing things; acting things out; and making films or recordings. The following activities were categorized as more passive: listening while the teacher talks or demonstrates how to do something; listening to student reports; listening to speakers who come to class; writing answers to questions; taking tests or quizzes; and reading. We knew already that nearly all classes, especially in English and mathematics, are far more passive than active when looked at in this way. But we were interested in the *relative* differences among track levels on this dimension. We also asked the students what kinds of activities they did in class and the observers what activities they saw taking place.

We considered the observers' reports of several other kinds of student involvement in classrooms important: an estimate of students' interest level; the percentage of time students spent off-task; the oppor-

tunities students had to answer open-ended questions; the existence of cooperative small groupings of students for learning; and the opportunities students had to direct classroom activity.

Finally, we used two indicators of how much students seemed to participate in classroom decision making. One was the students' responses to the following series of statements:

We are free to talk in this class about anything we want.
Students help make the rules for this class.
We are free to work with anyone we want to in this class.
We can decide what we want to learn in this class.
Students help decide what we do in this class.
Different students can do different things in this class.
Sometimes I can study or do things I am interested in even if they are different from what other students are studying or doing.
I help decide what I do in this class.

The second was the observers' reports of who—the teacher or students—made classroom decisions during the time they were in class. We felt that all this information together would give us insight into the degree of student involvement in classrooms.

The most significant thing we found is that generally our entire sample of classes turned out to be pretty noninvolving places. As we expected, passive activities—listening to the teacher, writing answers to questions, and taking tests—were dominant at all track levels. And, also not unexpected, the opportunities students had in any group of classes to answer open-ended questions, to work in cooperative learning groups, to direct the classroom activity, or to make decisions about what happened in class were extremely limited. In most classes these things just did not happen at all.¹² Any statements that can be made about differences between tracks in this respect must be seen in this context.

Having said this, we may look at some important *relative* differences in the opportunities students had to be involved in their classes at various track levels. Even though all students were primarily passive participants in the classroom as a result of the few opportunities they had to be otherwise, high-track students seemed to have somewhat more active learning activities available to them than others. They were more likely to go on trips, to do research, to do narrative or expository writing, to act things out, or to make films or recordings. On the other hand, while all students had extremely limited opportunities to make deci-

sions low-track students seemed to have had more than others. On the basis of these last data, certainly, we cannot say with confidence that the different learning experiences students had available to them in different track levels created the likelihood that students would be more or less involved in class.

The other indicators of involvement revealed important track-level differences. First of all, as we saw in chapter 5, the percentage of students not attending to learning activities was much greater in low- than in high-track classes. Further, the classroom observers estimated that a considerably greater percentage of high-track students were interested in what was going on in class. These two observations are consistent with what students themselves reported about their own involvement—the most substantial differences we found.

Marked differences were apparent on all three measures of how students perceived their involvement. Students in high-track classes saw themselves as being more involved in their classes than low-track students. Students in low-track classes reported that they were far less concerned about completing classroom tasks—doing the assigned work, the homework, or what the teacher told them to do. They also reported far greater degrees of apathy—not caring about what goes on in class or even being concerned about failing. Further, students in low-track classes reported far more often that they felt excluded, left out of class activities. Interestingly, the average classes did not follow their usual pattern in this area. While average English classes were quite like the high track, average math classes were more like the low.

★ What do all these pieces of information tell us about student involvement in different track levels? First, when we look just at what we might think are involving activities, track levels don't seem to differ much. None of the groups of classes seemed to generate a high level of active student involvement. In the absence of a large number of *activities* that involve students in learning, greater weight must be given to the subtler interactive methods of involvement that are more likely to reflect teacher/school attitudes, values, and expectations for different groups of students. Both the observers' reports and the responses of students tell us that students in high-track classes were far more involved than were students in the low group.

Clearly, there is something more than class activities that influences student involvement. We could speculate about what these other

things might be. Many, for example, would suggest that a lack of involvement or interest in school or learning is a characteristic trait of those students who end up in low tracks and has little to do with what happens to them in the school setting. This is a difficult assumption to sustain since, as we have indicated earlier, students' characteristics are closely intertwined with what happens to them at school from the time they begin. It is nearly impossible to sort out these complex factors to produce neat causal explanations for how students end up in a low track in high school. It is probably safe to assume that an interaction of student characteristics and school experience, or even school treatment, has produced a student who tends to be off-task, uninterested, noncompliant, and apathetic and that such a student is also a low achiever or low in basic intelligence or whatever it is that gets him or her placed in low-track classes. To this assumption may be added the likelihood that the current classroom experience is so powerful that it can generate the low-track set of responses in students. This, of course, is exactly what Willis and others suggest. In earlier chapters, we have seen a great deal of evidence that the students in the classes we studied were having very different educational experiences. These differences should be borne in mind when we consider why low-track students were so much less involved than students in the high track. The substantial differences in the content they were experiencing and the learning opportunities that were available to them may have contributed to the lesser involvement of low-track students. Tracking from the earliest grades will undoubtedly result in different educational outcomes. But so can tracking in a given school year.

To see how this might be the case, it is worthwhile to look again at McDermott's conception of how relationships can influence learning and how student involvement with and time spent in learning activities are mediated by the relationship of teachers and students. Our data are consistent with McDermott's explanations of how relationships influence both students' understanding of what is to be done and their attending to it. Students' perceptions of how concerned their teachers were about them lead us to believe that "trusting relations" were far more likely in high-track classes than in low. Further, the much higher level of teacher punitiveness that was reported in low-track classes reminds us of McDermott's finding that trusting relations did not exist in classes where punishment was relied upon to attempt to coerce students into compli-

ance. A higher degree of punitiveness, a lower degree of trusting relationships, and less involvement in class activities are related to lower educational outcomes and are more associated with low-track classes. The time measures help to fill out this pattern in that more teacher time and energy were spent on getting students to behave in low-track classes. Some of our student-involvement measures support this picture as well. Rather than participate cooperatively in what the teacher wanted them to do—as they would be likely to do if they viewed the teachers' directions as in their own best interests—low-track students tended to be noncompliant and apathetic. Apparently more of their time and energy was spent interfering with their teachers' plans.

If we consider students' relationships with one another as also important in creating a trusting environment where everyone works on a common project of learning, we see large discrepancies among track levels. Trust, cooperation, and even good will among students were far less characteristic of low-track classes than of high. More student time and energy were spent in hostile and disruptive interchanges in these classes. Clearly, the students' time and energy spent in negotiating relationships and maintaining a combative stance toward those who do not appear to be working in their best interests are time and attention taken away from learning activity. And, as McDermott suggests, this diversion of time and attention is likely to have a negative influence on academic outcomes.

We know from the research on classroom climate that the characteristics of classrooms in which students learn more include warm and positive relationships, task orientation, and student involvement. We know from our research that these features are also more characteristic of high-track classes than low. McDermott's explanations of how relationships may mediate learning help us understand how these characteristics made a difference in student learning. We see in our data just those combinations of classroom features that McDermott suggests.

Again we find a pattern of classroom experiences that seems to enhance the learning possibilities for those students already disposed to do well—those in high-track classes. We see even more clearly a pattern likely to inhibit the learning of those at the bottom. Once again, we find that those students who need the most help from the school environment are getting the least.

Turning to the issue of student socialization, it is apparent too that

the differences in the relationship and involvement dimensions of classroom climates are consistent with the different kinds of socialization that Bowles and Gintis and more recent writers suggest take place in schools and classrooms. Our findings support the theory in that classes where poor and minority students are most likely to be found—low-track classes—were more characterized by alienation, distance, and authority than were high-track classes. Also supporting this view were the greater proportion of time teachers spent on discipline and student behavior, students' perceptions of their teachers as more punitive and less concerned about them, the more negative feelings and behaviors students reported they exhibited toward one another, and the more negative student attitudes expressed toward classroom experiences that were found in low-track classes. At the same time, the proportionately less time spent on behavior by teachers, students' perceptions of teachers as less punitive and more concerned about them, the lower levels of student hostility toward peers and apathy toward the classroom situation, and the less frequent student reports of feeling isolated found in high-track classes seem to provide support for the assertion that those at the upper levels experience relationships that lead them to affiliate with the schooling experience.

There is some additional support in our findings for the hypothesis that students from different groups have different types of involvement with their schooling experience as a result of the type of social relationships they experience. High-track classes tended to be more characterized by a greater frequency of active learning activities and more on-task behavior in the classroom as well as a considerably higher level of student involvement as students themselves perceived it than were the low-track groups. However, no differences were observed in the number of opportunities students had to direct classroom activity, to express opinions, or to work cooperatively together. It seems clear that in *all* types of classrooms students were primarily passive participants. Indeed, there is little evidence in the data that the structure of learning activities in any track level was such that students participated in decision making or in classroom or group leadership for any more than a small fraction of class time. However, high-track students appear to have experienced more active involvement than others, even on this small scale.

Bowles and Gintis assert that the values and personality characteristics necessary for the maintenance of an unequal society are produced

in students through their social relationships. They suggest that for students from the lower social strata—those seen as most likely to enter the manual-labor force—school and classroom relationships promote acceptance of coercion and obedience to established authority. Willis and others remind us that students' open rejection of school plays a part in this process. On the other hand, for students from the upper social levels—those most expected to enter elite positions—relationships foster independence, internal control, and affiliation with others.

It is likely that the differences in relationships found in our classrooms contribute to the differences in values and dispositions toward institutions suggested by these scholars. Our study does not indicate whether the differences in relationships found among track levels correspond to those found at different occupational levels in the economic hierarchy. What we saw is merely consistent with the proposition that students from different socioeconomic positions experience differences in their classroom relationships and types of involvement in learning activity. Furthermore, these differences have a strong potential for leading students differentially either toward affiliation with and active involvement in social institutions or toward alienation from and a more negative involvement in the institutions they encounter.

The view of schools as meritocratic institutions where, regardless of race or class, those students with the "right stuff" are given a neutral environment where they can rise to the top is called into question by our findings. Everywhere we turn we see the likelihood of in-school barriers to upward mobility for capable poor and minority students. The measures of talent seem clearly to work against them, resulting in their disproportionate placement in groups identified as slow. Once there, their achievement seems to be further inhibited by the type of knowledge they are exposed to and the quality of learning opportunities they are afforded. Further, the social and psychological dimensions of classrooms for those at the bottom of the schooling hierarchy impose more constraints on students. Negative relationships and low levels of student involvement appear not only to restrict their chances of learning but to socialize students in such a way that they are prepared to stay at the bottom levels of institutions, not only as teenagers in schools but in adult life as well.

We know that some bright students who begin with racial and economic handicaps do excel in school. Some of these students manage to

struggle to the top despite the constraints they encounter in their school experience. And because they do, we often point to them as examples that confirm the meritocratic nature of schooling. We like to say that because some students use the schools to achieve upward mobility, both educationally and economically, that schools in general are structured to provide students from all backgrounds with an equal chance to do so. But the overcoming of barriers by a small percentage of students certainly is not evidence of the unbiased nurturing of the talents of all students. Our notion of schools as meritocratic institutions seems to be on very shaky ground.

But the notion of meritocracy is somewhat removed from the concept of equality. Meritocracy is based not on equality itself but on the idea of equality of opportunity, on fairness. In schools this is translated to mean that every student is given an equal chance to do well. If a student does not, it is due to the lack of ability, initiative, or sustained effort on the student's part not to any school practices that might have gotten in the way. Educational equality itself can mean something quite different. It can mean that all students are provided with the same kinds of experience in schools—a common set of learnings, equally effective instruction, and equally encouraging educational settings. Our data show that in the twenty-five schools we studied students were not treated equally in their attempts to learn English and math.

But notions of equality can go even further than this concept of equal treatment. Educational equality can be interpreted to mean that students are provided with the resources necessary to ensure that they are all likely to acquire a specified set of learnings. This might be translated in schools to mean that resources are allocated and instruction designed so that those entering schools least likely to do well are given the best schools have to offer. Certainly we found no evidence of this kind of equality operating in schools. Indeed, we found the opposite to be the case. Those least likely to do well were given the least in the three areas of school experience we studied. Those most likely to do well were given the best.

We are reminded of two conflicting views presented in Robert Frost's "The Death of a Hired Man." Warren says:

Home is the place where, when you have to go there
They have to take you in.

In such a home, even a comfortably appointed room with its own television set would not indicate full acceptance and equality of family membership. How similar to the ungracious reception given to low-tracked students! Fortunately, in Frost's poem, Mary counters Warren's begrudging sense of obligation with her own more generous and unmeritocratic view:

I should have called it
Something you somehow haven't to deserve:

Can the right to equal education be really seen in any other way?

7

Student Attitudes: The Legitimation of Inequality

How did the students in our twenty-five secondary schools feel about the experiences we have been describing? Were students in the top track especially pleased, or even smug, about the obviously preferential treatment they received? Were those at the bottom outraged at what seems to be so obvious—that they were getting so much less than others? Could they not have known? Could they not have cared? Is it possible that they thought they were getting just about what they deserved?

We have scrutinized the differences in the schooling experiences between those students identified as the most able and those identified as the least. But the answers to the questions posed above are crucial to the issues we have been considering throughout this book. How students felt about what they experienced can give us valuable insight about the most personal effects of the differences in the day-to-day classroom events that we found. How students feel about themselves and their school experience is likely to direct how they conduct themselves in schools and their adult lives.

Finding the answers to these questions is not easy in a study like ours. We collected our data from thousands of students at only one point in time. At that time we did have some hunches about how track levels in our schools might be different from one another, but we could not anticipate the exact nature or extent of the differences we would find. Clearly, then, we could not have asked our students specifically how they felt about phenomena we were not even sure existed. And, of course,

