How Much Choice is Too Much?

Whether it applies to curriculum or vouchers, career paths or college, the vague concept of choice is often invoked as a panacea for the failings of our educational system. One can easily imagine a pontificating College Republican hitting her talking points: Education's purpose should be to provide every student with the *opportunity* to succeed, she'd bellow, narrowing her eyes. If students do not choose to take advantage of that opportunity, that's *their* prerogative! Success is a choice each student makes, she'd contend. Thus, failure is a choice as well.

Coming from a liberal perspective, which I am, it is often easy to viscerally dismiss such rhetoric. As sure as Pavlov's dog will salivate at the chime of a bell, the word "choice" in economic or educational discourse will put a liberal on the defensive.[1] Like the buzz-words "pro-marriage," "death tax," "state's rights," etcetera, "choice" is a tainted euphemism seen only as thinly veiling an evil conservative agenda to write blank checks to corporate overlords and let poor people starve to death. Choice gets at one of the fundamental distinctions between liberals and conservatives: Conservatives tend to view a person's socio-economic position as a result of the choices they have made. Liberals tend to see things like poverty as more systemic problems.[2]

Obviously, the reality of the situation is not this black-and-white—or blue and red, for that matter. One of the most prevalent current debates within schools and academia is how much curricular choice should be made available to students. I will argue, in classic politician fashion, that the answer is complicated. Choice, in this instance, is a potentially double-edged sword.

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[1] An obvious counter-point here is that liberals also use the term "choice" to euphemize the decision to have an abortion. When I speak of the term "choice" in this paper I will only be referring to it as used in educational and economic discussions. It is interesting to note, however, that the term is used by both political parties to spin a political position in a certain way. If nothing else, the politicization of the term demonstrates the consensus amongst politicians that there is something inherently desirable to the American public about having "choice" in their lives.

[2] See Skitka, L. J., et al. 470.

There are benefits to allowing students to choose their curriculum, certainly—that does not mean, however, that there should be as many available choices as desired tracks. While some choice and tracking is beneficial, all tracks made available to students should be geared toward making that student "successful" in their lives. Students should not be able to "choose" a failing track in school, because, as clichéd as it sounds, failure should not be an option that is made available. The purpose of education should never be tracking students into likely poverty.

I have already argued that choice is a notoriously (and often intentionally) obfuscated term, so let me prevent myself from becoming a hypocrite. When discussing how much curricular choice is given to students I am referring to the range of tracks made available to students in a given school, and how much it should be up to students and families (as opposed to advisors, teachers, or testing) to choose individual tracks. In my conception, the amount of choice allowed runs across a spectrum. Neither extreme is especially ideal. Instead, I will argue that the most beneficial system falls somewhere in the middle. The question I will seek to answer is not whether schools should offer curricular choice; rather, to what degree, and in what specific ways should that choice be made available.

For there to be curricular choice, there need to be options available to choose between. Multiple tracks in school, however, is by no means a given as tracking students provides its own whirlwind of debate and controversy. The fact of the matter is that the track a student is placed in correlates with their socio-economic background. Although the reasons for this are most likely multi-fold, the fear is that there is a bias at work. This has been a concern for some time, and not simply about secondary education, but from the earliest onsets. Ray Rist's seminal 1970 article "Student Social Class and Teacher Expectations" showed biased tracking as early as kindergarten. Rist found that the criteria used by kindergarten teachers to sort students into

higher-level reading groups were based on students' display of attributes commonly associated with being "necessary" for future success. The characteristics of the students who were sorted into the lower reading group included being dirty, smelling of urine, not actively participating in class, speaking in "linguistic dialect other than the that spoken by the teacher and students," and coming from "poor homes often supported by public welfare."[3] Rist found no statistically significant correlation between tested IQ and the teacher's sorting. The conclusion was that teachers sort students according to their conflation of social class with behavior and aptitude for learning, and that this early sorting creates a fairly inflexible track for these groups beginning at an early age. In a follow-up with the same students in second grade, Rist found little change in the original tracks of these students. He argued that these tracks amounted to caste-like structures based largely on social class as it was supremely difficult for students to move from one track to another year to year. Historically, the same phenomenon has been seen in secondary education. In her book *Keeping Track* Jeannie Oakes describes how tracking in secondary education has helped perpetuate the established social order. Tracks correlated with socio-economic class, and students generally had little to no say in which track they were placed in.

We must be careful to not throw the baby out with the bathwater here. Tracks certainly have their problems. But we must ask whether separate tracks are inherently undesirable, or simply correlation between higher quality tracks and socio-economic status. If tracking is bad, de-tracking is not necessarily better. James Rosenbaum, a one-time advocate of de-tracking, followed the disastrous results of one high school's attempt to de-track its students. In Rosenbaum's words, de-tracking,

[3] Rist, 294

> transformed teaching from difficult to impossible. It transformed the ideal of equal instruction for all into practices offering less instruction for all. It transformed faster students from motivated allies to disengaged threats. And it transformed teachers from de-tracking enthusiasts into advocates for a return to tracking.[4]

Most people would agree that the ideal educational system would properly educate everyone. The fact of the matter, however, is that there *are* and *always will be* differences in ability between students. The solution is not to ignore students' strengths and weaknesses by pooling everyone together. Rather, tracks can be beneficial so long as they separate students according to ability as opposed to socio-economic status.

This is the point in the discussion where our choice advocate would most likely clear her throat. "Precisely right," she'd say, cocking an eyebrow. "And who knows better what their strengths are than the students themselves?" Good point, hypothetical choice-advocate. During the 1990s many argued that exact position. In the preface to the 2005 version of her book, Oakes describes how, "the old rigid system of completely separate and explicit academic, general, and vocational programs…has now largely disappeared" as a result of the backlash against tracking. In this system's stead, Oakes points out that "In almost all schools, *choice* has become an increasingly salient factor in placing students onto tracks, shifting the responsibility for differentiated opportunities, resources, and expectations from the school to the students. With *choice*, students in lower-level classes have only themselves to blame."[italics mine][5]

The push for curricular choice didn't begin in the 1990s. The current had been strong as early as the 1985 book *The Shopping Mall High School.* Although they were far from choice advocates, the system the authors of that book describe is the system that many advocate for our secondary schools. Teachers and students would create ostensible contracts for themselves and

[4] Rosenbaum, 6.
[5] Oakes. x-xi.

the amount of work and responsibility in a given track or class is understood beforehand. The lower tracks would often be filled with busy work and designed simply to get students through the required coursework at the high school so they could graduate. The idea is that each student would choose which classes to take and, as Oakes described in the preface of her book, the responsibility would shift from schools to students. Tracks would still exist, but no one could cry foul because students could opt into whichever track they desired.

It is easy to see how one might argue that a pure version of this system could help solve the problems endemic to tracking. If the choice of curriculum is left entirely up to the student, than schools would never even have the opportunity to exert socio-economic biases on the tracking of students. The reasons why this is no panacea, however, is two-fold:

(1) It lowers the bar of what education should be. *The Shopping Mall High School* describes instances where in exchange for no behavioral problems, a lower-track teacher agreed to assign minimal work. Our advocate might point out that this keeps potential drop-outs in school and off the streets. At least they're going to get a diploma and they're not in jail, she might say. I respond by saying that if we allow students to opt into tracks where the educational value is next to nothing, we will only further weaken the value of the American high school diploma.

(2) Choice does nothing to alleviate the socio-economic achievement gap. The correlation between track and economic class is a symptom of the deeper socio-economic disparity in our society. In a society where socio-economic disparities exist, the public education system can and should be used to help close that gap, rather than maintain or exacerbate it. In a pure choice system, low socio-economic status will still correlate with so many other disadvantages that poor children will probably still disproportionately make up the lower tracks. College educated parents, a two-parent household, encouragement at home, money for private tutoring and

extracurricular activities are all variables that correlate with both socio-economic status as well as academic achievement.

All tracks in school should be geared toward successful economic integration of the graduate into society. A graduate of high school should either be qualified to attend some institution of higher learning or able to be employed in a position that will allow the student to support themselves. Thus, while there should still be separate tracks and some freedom to choose between them, there should be core requirements and skills every high school student, regardless of track, should have upon graduation. This would require an exit exam (or something equivalent) that tests these skills. The downside here is that there would be an increase in drop-outs. While this is undesirable, it is necessary if we want a high school diploma to mean anything more than, "I was capable of showing up to school enough that I didn't get kicked out."

This being said, we should not abandon curricular choice altogether. Although it would take a sizeable investment, public secondary schools should invest heavily in expanding both the size and the quality of their academic advisory staff. With a small advisor-student ratio, advisors would be able to get to know their students personally, figure out where their individual strengths lay, and nudge them and guide them in the direction that best fits their individual needs. An expansion of advising capabilities and quality should be prioritized with regard to funding over second-order programs like sports and extracurricular activities. While these programs are also beneficial, education should be the priority of our public schools. One-on-one guidance and advising should be an integral component to that education.

Placing the entire burden of curricular choice squarely upon the shoulders of a fourteen-year-old high school freshman is absurd. As a society, we don't trust these kids to drive a car, but we somehow expect them to be able to choose a curriculum that best suits them, and best

serves their future. A pure choice system may work if every student had parents who took an active interest in his or her education. Sadly, that will never be the case. Instead of letting these children fend for themselves, it should be a major priority of schools to advise their students in the choices they make, and guide them into appropriate tracks.

We should allow for choice, variety, and a students' ownership over their own education. That being said, these students are only children. One of education's primary roles within our society should be to help guide children into responsible adulthood. But we must remember that there are not responsible adults yet.

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