



---

## Role Play on Origins of Tracking

What we don't teach in school can be more important than what we do teach. When we fail to engage students in thinking critically about their own schooling, the hidden message is: Don't analyze the institutions that shape your lives; don't ask who benefits, who suffers and how it got to be this way; just shut up and do as you're told.

Several years ago, my partner Linda Christensen and I began teaching a unit on the history and sociology of schooling. In the unit, students wrote and shared stories about their own school lives - both good learning experiences as well as times they encountered unfairness or abuse. We invited students to probe the hidden curricula in their own classes, including ours, asking them to reflect on what they were learning about authority, bosses and democracy; solidarity and resistance, people's capacity to stand up for themselves and each other; knowledge, what kind is valued and where it comes from; and self respect. Our class travelled to a high school in a wealthy Portland suburb to compare the hidden curriculum there with that at Jefferson, a school serving a predominantly working class, African-American community.

### Roots of Modern Schooling

To explore some of the historical roots of the modern high school I wrote a role play that I hoped would allow students to question aspects of schooling they often take for granted, such as tracking ("ability grouping"), standardized testing, guidance counseling, student government, the flag salute, bells, required courses with patriotic themes, and extracurricular activities like athletics and the school newspaper. These now commonplace components of high school life were introduced in the early years of the twentieth century, a time of growing union militancy and radicalism, and large-scale immigration from southern and eastern Europe, accompanied by vastly increased high school enrollment.

### Class Stratification

Underlying the new reforms was a consensus among leading educators that social class stratification was here to stay, and that high schools should abandon a single academic curriculum for all students. Charles Eliot of Harvard, for example, argued that classes were "eternal," with an elite "guiding class" at the top and on the bottom, a "thick fundamental layer engaged in household work, agriculture, mining, quarrying, and forest work." Schools, the educational establishment concluded, must be "realistic" and train children for specific roles in the social hierarchy. Intelligence testing would allegedly insure students' accurate placement in differentiated curricular tracks. Simultaneously, as one school board president complained, "Many educators have failed to face the big problem of teaching patriotism. ... We need to teach American children about American heroes and American ideals."

Instead of just lecturing about the profound changes in schools occurring in the early years of the century, I wanted students to encounter them as if they were members of different social classes and ethnic groups, learning of proposed reforms for the first time. Through argument and negotiation, students-as-different-social-groups would need to decide whether they supported the then-new reforms in public education.

In the activity, I portray a gung-ho superintendent, newly arrived in "Central City," determined to modernize - i.e., stratify and "Americanize"- the curriculum. Each student portrays an individual in one of five social groups: corporate executives, members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), middle class people, Hungarian immigrants, and Black activists.

Everyone is posed a series of questions about their views on schooling and is invited to advise the superintendent at a community meeting. In preparation, each group has a chance to consult and

build alliances with any of the others. Through participating in the role play I hoped students might see first-hand that the school reforms were not simply benign, value-free changes, but were deeply political, benefiting some people at the expense of others. (See also the section, "An explicit critique of tracking," in "Getting Off the Track: Stories from an Untracked Classroom," p. 63.)

## Role Play Instructions

**Materials Needed:** Enough for all students: copies of "Superintendent's Statement," "School Reform Meeting Questions," and "Sample Intelligence Test." Enough role sheets so that each student has a role. (pp.120-124)

**Procedure** (also see "Suggestions for a Successful Role Play," p. 116.):

1. Write on the board: Place: "**CENTRAL CITY, USA;**" Time: "**EARLY 1920s.**" Also list the names of the five social groups. (Note: "Central City" represents numerous midwestern and Eastern U.S. cities; I set the role play in the early 1920s because this is when standardized testing took off, but the social and educational trends described in the role play began earlier, in the beginning years of the twentieth century.)

2. Divide the class into five groups, of roughly equal numbers. Distribute a different role sheet to students in each of the groups: i.e., all the members of one group portray Hungarian immigrants, etc. Ask students to read these carefully, and, in their role, to think about the kind of schooling they want for their children. Encourage them to mark important sections. After they've finished reading, you might ask them to write a brief interior monologue - their inner thoughts - on what kind of education they hope for their children; or they might write on their fears. Afterwards ask them to read these to others in their group. The goal here is simply to prompt students to internalize the information in their role sheets, and to encourage them to imagine these individuals as real people. Ask students to make placards or name cards indicating their social group.

3. Tell students that Central City has hired a new superintendent who is proposing a series of reforms in Central City high schools. To each student, hand out the "Superintendent's Statement" and the "School Reform Meeting Questions." As mentioned, the teacher plays the superintendent. Before my "speech," I generally ask a student to introduce me as Superintendent Quincy P. Aldrich or another similarly aristocratic sounding name. I read the statement aloud, with a good dose of pomp, stopping along the way to emphasize a point and to make sure students understand each proposed reform. (Note that the four tracks — feeble-minded, dull, etc. — come from a quote by Lewis Terman of Stanford, who suggested that these categories of students would never change. I tell students that if they don't like those designations, perhaps they'd prefer the tracks suggested by Professor George Strayer of Teachers College: bright, slow, backward, and deficient. Clearly, I am hoping to provoke students by using these terms. For public consumption, the educational elite preferred designations such as college, general, commercial, and vocational.) I assure the gathering that all tracking will be based on scientific evidence and I have a sample test to prove it. Students always want to see the test, so at this point I distribute "Sample Intelligence Test," (developed by Lewis Terman, p. 121). "What does knowing the color of emeralds have to do with your intelligence?" an inquiring immigrant or Black activist might ask. I encourage students' critical questions, but don't respond to them all as I want to conserve their defiant energy for the community meeting.

After the superintendent's proposal on guidance counseling, I emphasize that this is especially important considering the increased number of females in school these days: "Why, suppose a girl were to score high on a science test. It would be senseless to place her in a chemistry class. There are few if any female chemists in the country. It would be more sound to place her in an advanced domestic science course, which will help prepare her for the actual challenges she'll face in her life."

After my presentation, I tell people that I don't want to argue about the reforms I've proposed, that right now all I want are questions about my speech, and later, in the community meeting, they'll have a chance to argue all they want. Generally, students in several of the groups will pay no attention to this plea and will argue anyway. Again, at this stage it's good to get their critical juices flowing, but not to exhaust their arguments.

4. In preparation for the community meeting, in their small groups, students should discuss the

"School Reform Meeting Questions" and, at least tentatively, decide what they think. These opinions may change based on their negotiations with other groups.

5. After they've had a while, probably 15 minutes or so, to discuss the questions, I say something like: "Choose half your group to be 'travelling negotiators.' These people will meet with individuals in other groups to discuss the questions. This is your chance to find people who agree with you about the superintendent's reforms, or to convince others. Remember, there is power in numbers; the more united you are in the community meeting, the more likely it is that the superintendent will be convinced — or forced — to agree with you. One rule: travellers can't meet with other travellers, otherwise people left sitting in their groups will be left out."

6. This is the part I enjoy the most. As students dart around the classroom arguing points and finding allies, I listen in (as teacher, not superintendent), sometimes prodding people to meet with other groups or raising points they may not have considered. There is no "correct" amount of time to give this phase, but I don't want students' enthusiasm to wane, so I call a halt before they're talked out, perhaps twenty minutes or so.

7. Students should return to their small groups to prepare a presentation, however informal, on the various questions. I ask each group to choose a member to write on the board their response to question #1, on the purpose of schooling.

8. I seat the entire class in a circle (people should remain seated with their social group, each indicated with a placard) and begin the meeting by asking each group to respond to the question on the purpose of schooling. Again, there is no right and wrong way to run the meeting. The aim is to encourage the most spirited and democratic participation possible. As superintendent, I'm able to provoke people, point out contradictions, and raise questions. By the way, sometime during the community meeting I remind them that this is only an advisory meeting, that there is a school board, elected citywide, to decide educational policy. I'm just seeking "input." We wouldn't want to give students the false impression that all social groups affected by school reform actually had any say-so.

9. After the meeting, it's important that students have a way to distance themselves from their roles so the debriefing discussion is not simply a continuation of the community meeting. Sometimes I ask students to write about who they think "won" in real life, and to think about how things work in our high school today, to get clues on whose vision of schooling prevailed. Students might write a critique of the superintendent's position or of the position of one of the groups, including their own. Alternatively, they might remain in character to write an interior monologue on how they feel about their child's future in Central City Schools. Afterwards they might read these to the class.

10. Discussion questions include:

- Who do you think "won" in real life?
- Which of the reforms do you think were adopted in U.S. schools?
- (If a majority of the groups opposed the superintendent's plan:) If most of you opposed the reforms, why were they put into effect? What power did the different social groups have? What power didn't they have?
- Which of the alliances you built might not have happened in real life? Why not?
- Which of the superintendent's proposals do you see in our school today? (Note: When my partner, Linda Christensen, and I did this role play with our untracked Literature in U.S. History class this year, we noticed that students who had previously been in the top track "scholars" program recognized immediately that our school is tracked. Other students, the majority, who had not experienced life at the top were unaware of how stratified our school is. One girl said, "We're mixed in here. The immigrants must have won.")
- Draw students' attention to the five purposes of schooling on the board: Which of these do you personally find most appealing? Why?
- Which of these seems closest to the kind of schooling you've had? Which of these do you think guides the way our school is set up today?
- What did the "intelligence test" measure? What didn't it measure?
- If you haven't already done so, it might be valuable to have students write about their personal experiences with standardized testing and/or tracking.

*This material is from the online presentation for Rethinking School Reform: Views From The Classroom, edited by Linda Christensen and Stan Karp, published by Rethinking Schools. For more information see [www.rethinkingschools.org/rsr](http://www.rethinkingschools.org/rsr)*

Summer 2003

---

© 2002 Rethinking Schools \* 1001 E. Keefe Avenue, Milwaukee, WI 53212 \* Phone(414) 964-9646, or (800) 669-4192,  
FAX: (414) 964-7220 Email: [webrs@execpc.com](mailto:webrs@execpc.com)