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Tracking: The Most Controversial Issue in Education

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Tracking and ability grouping, long misunderstood components of American education, still reign in our educational society as most American schools, including over eighty percent of secondary schools, segregate their students into distinct academic groups. Therefore it is no surprise that tracking remains as one of the most highly contested issues in education. In this review I will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of tracking and discuss a myriad of controversies relative to ability grouping. I will investigate the effects of tracking on ethnic performance expectations as well as curriculum equity issues involving minority groupings. I will also discuss the origins of tracking relative to the early grouping of students in elementary grades. Various structures of tracking will be discussed relative to their degree of effectiveness in the elementary, middle, and high school settings and their effect relative to teacher expectations towards student motivation/achievement. Theorists contend that tracking is another tactic to segregate students in our public schools. This issue will be researched as well. Lastly, I will investigate why critics argue that the psychological effect of tracking, coupled with its static placement procedures, predestines low performing children to fail.

Historical Perspective

In the 1920's and 1930's educators initiated tracking to deliberately place students in groups according to their ranked ability. Mallery and Mallery (1999) state, "tracking began as an effort to prepare students for distinct careers and lives that awaited by placing them in specific educational 'tracks' which essentially amounted to 'low', 'average', and 'high' ability groups" (p.13). While research indicates that the practice of academic tracking at the middle and high school levels began to diminish somewhat by the 1950's, it quickly regained prominence in America's public schools by 1960. Jeannie Oakes, one of the nation's leading researchers on tracking notates this historical perspective. "Tracking is a conscious, deliberate, conspiracy on the part of the capitalistic bourgeois elements in society. These groups seek to protect their privileges and property by providing low-level educational programs for the

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which gave racially motivated educators a new method of legally segregating schools. Mallery and Mallery (1999) write, "it was considered an effort by Southern states to dilute the effects of the *Brown* decision....a response by Northern school systems to the influx of African-American students caused by the large-scale migrations of African-American families from the South" (p.14). Following the *Brown* decision, standardized and IQ test usage also skyrocketed and became one of the central vehicles to supporting the separation of students into ability groups.

Despite the criticism surrounding the tracking issue, it still remains as a universal characteristic of most American schools. Nevi (1987) states, "others who have studied the issue indicate that it was being practiced at least as early as the turn of the century, and that today it is established in thousands of American schools. Some observers even say that the history of education is the history of tracking" (p.272).

From a humorous viewpoint, many argue that tracking originated in the 1800s when the one-room schoolhouse teacher divided the students into groups of those who could read and those could not. "Certainly it began when teachers started organizing their students into grade- and age- level groups, a clear indication that some students were going to cover different content or the same content at a different rates" (Nevi, 1987, p. 273). Lucas and Berend's (2002) research indicates,

"The basis of contemporary tracking is contested. Some analysts have noted that tracking allows the formation of homogeneous groups based on students' achievement and that such groups are easier to teach. For these analysts, tracking is best understood as a technical pedagogical device. Others however, have concluded that tracking inescapably involves racial, ethnic, and class segregation" (p.328).

It seems clear in any regard that tracking revolves around the issues of academic rank and ability combined with more subtle factors as race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status.

According to Tieso (2003), "elementary schools today using a form of ability grouping do not use IQ or aptitude tests as a placement tool" (p.32). They tend to use achievement tests or other student-related performance criteria to determine appropriate grouping of students.

There are many reasons why tracking is prominent in our public schools. As the education system has become more complex with broader and more diverse students and content, the use of various tracking systems has become more prolific. In addition, some federal programs such as Chapter I require educators to tailor special programs for special population groups such as gifted and talented. Oakes argues, "that tradition is one of the main reasons for the existence of tracking. Certainly this historical sorting of students into groups was done for

one of the reasons Oakes gives for tracking today: homogeneous groups are easier to teach" (Nevi, 1987,p.273). In contrast, Bracey (2003) indicates that "Japanese schools don't track students until high school, and that German schools track children beginning with the fourth grade" (p.332). Ironically, German educators have historically blamed tracking for the poor performance of German students. Many believe tracking is a method for finding a more conducive environment for educating some selected groups in our schools, while others think it is simply a technique for matching the learner with the optimum learning environment. Nevertheless, it has become the preferred method for accommodating individual differences among students of varied backgrounds. Nevi points out "unless everyone is going to be taught everything simultaneously, grouping is necessary. Therefore, tracking is not an attempt to create differences, but to accommodate them" (p.273).

Accommodating differences is the ultimate challenge faced by educators in our schools today. This issue has been exacerbated by legislation such as the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). Many differences observed in students are not created by the school. Rather they are created in the home or social environment. While one might get the impression that students come to school with the same capabilities, this in essence is erroneous, as student capabilities and aptitudes vary significantly. Socioeconomic status and learning disabilities among students can affect one's ability to learn, and some students are simply more able than others. Some students come to school with a myriad of outside school experiences, where others come with little or no cultural experience beyond their home neighborhoods. Nevi (1987) purports, "Schools must concentrate on equalizing the day-to-day educational experiences for all students. This implies altering the structures and contents of schools that seem to accord greater benefits to some groups of students than to others. Treating all students the same is not a formula for equity or excellence" (p.273).

Differentiation is characterized by Bracey (2003) as creating different types of schools that follow a general rubric: "1) type of school, 2) course of study, 3) streaming, 4) ability grouping, 5) geographic location. All five can affect a student's trajectory through school, and all have the potential to create serious inequities in educational opportunity" (p.332).

An example of a type of school tracking might include vocational versus academic. "Course of study" tracking involves students studying different subjects in different contexts. "Streaming" refers to students being tracked or having a choice to choose either a vocational or college-preparatory track. Ability grouping is common practice in the United States, and simply places students in appropriate level academic tracks, while geographic tracking is more common in the U.S. than in Germany and Japan.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Research reveals a disparity in beliefs about the advantages and disadvantages, as well as the strategies of tracking in various types of schools. Looking first at concerns relative to racial and ethnic equalities, which many cite is the most pronounced concern among educators and researchers, it appears evident that racial and ethnic minorities are distributed disproportionately through middle and high school tracking strategies. Mallery and Mallery (1999) state, "as ability grouping is practiced today, white and Asian students are vastly overrepresented in high groupings, while African-American and Latino students are similarly overrepresented in the low rankings" (p.13). Evidence clearly shows that African-American and Latino students were much less likely to be placed in high level courses than were white and Asian students, even when tests scores were somewhat similar. This is often the result of rather random processes utilized in our schools by which teachers recommend students for programs such as gifted and talented.

In fact, parents of the less advantaged groups often have little or no access to information about such programs. Additionally, Mallery and Mallery (1999) report, "the quality of education in low-ranked tracks tends to be inferior to others; more low-ranked tracks focus on drill and rote memorization. Similarly, higher-order thinking is often reserved for high-ability classes. Students more often than not get locked into a fixed ability level that does not change between the 7th and 12th grades. In today's American public high schools it is apparent that the practice of tracking is often used as a means of racially segregating student populations regardless of actual ability or test scores" (p. 14).

Most researchers believe it is this racial tension around the issue of tracking that will be the eventual downfall of the practice in the United States. Proponents of detracking believe that such denial of equality in education is the most plausible argument for the racial tension surrounding the tracking issue.

Socioeconomic backgrounds of students and the socio-demographic composition can also determine the manner in which a school tracks students, and as a result is deemed an advantage to some and a disadvantage to

others. Lucas and Berends (2002) claim "the sociodemographic composition of schools is the primary basis for the maintenance of tracking systems" (p.328). They go on to say, "although evidence suggests that tracking is more pronounced in racially and socioeconomically diverse schools; it is possible that this may be so because achievement may be more variable in those schools, and the correlation between achievement in different domains may be more pronounced in such schools as well" (p.332). Clearly, a student's background from not only an experiential standpoint, but also from a socioeconomic perspective is a factor relative to how that student might be tracked.

Another area of significant contention is that of curriculum differentiation with regard to how schools implement tracking. Lucas and Berends (2002) reveal that, "on one side are those who regard curriculum differentiation- the division of a constructed intellectual field into distinct courses of instruction- as tracking" (p.329). They continue saying, "on the other side are those who contend that curriculum differentiation is not tracking. For these analysts, tracking exists when there is an association between the level of courses that students take in two subjects or when there is an association between the level of courses that students take in the same subject over time. Such analysts argue that curriculum differentiation is a necessary condition for tracking, but not a significant one (p.329).

This lends great confusion to the notion that a school which differentiates in curriculum is truly a "tracked" school. It can be assumed that this is part of the great controversy that surrounds this topic. Lucas and Berends argue, "one will find such schools in abundance because the differentiated curriculum is still the dominant form of pedagogical organization in secondary schools in the United States. Analysts who equate curriculum differentiation with tracking will find tracking on a massive scale" (p.330).

Tracking and ability grouping is often correlated with achievement as higher achieving students are grouped together and vice versa. Similar to curriculum differentiation, ability tracking is also confronted with much controversy, but largely is connected to favorable reviews as to its effects. For example, Lucas and Berends (2002) state, "with such grouping, it may be possible to fine-tune instructional approaches to students' different levels and types of prior knowledge, and may facilitate the

teaching task by reducing the range of students to which teachers must orient at any given time. For these potential advantages to be realized, however, assignments must be made on the basis of prior achievement in the relevant subject” (p.331).

Similarly, students may then find themselves in equivalent level courses in different subjects as they often are correlated with each other. Grouping of students with similar academic ability is often viewed as a positive attribute of tracking in that the teacher can more appropriately match the level of instruction with the level of learners in the classroom. This can, however, lead to unrest as interested parents respond cautiously when schools begin placing students in courses (tracks) based on ability. Bracey (2003) aptly states the dilemma with this quote, “when asked how tracking was handled in a particular school, one administrator replied, “teachers refer, counselors refer, and parents push” (p.333). Nevi (1987) supports this viewpoint when he reports that, “Indeed, research supports tracking. A meta-analysis of 52 studies of secondary tracking programs found only trivial effects on the achievement of average and below average students. The research does not support the view of other recent reviewers who claim that grouping has unfavorable effects on the achievement of low aptitude students. The effect is near zero on the achievement of average and below-average students; it is not negative” (p.274). Studies demonstrate that students tend to enjoy their subjects more when they are grouped together with students of similar ability and these students often develop a better self- concept as a result of such grouping.

Negative Effects

Conversely, some researches argue that ability tracking has negative effects on student achievement, self-esteem, and educational equity. A recent court decision implies that tracking is inappropriate and unlawful when certain students are placed in a particular track on the assumption that they are capable of no more. Nevi (1987) provides what the court declared as an appropriate definition of tracking as “any system of ability grouping which, through a failure to include and implement the concept of compensatory education for the disadvantaged child or otherwise fails in fact to bring the great majority of children into the mainstream of public education denies the children excluded equal opportunity and thus encounters the constitutional bar” (p.275).

Nevi’s conclusion of some of Goodlad’s and Oakes’s work reveals that this type of grouping denies lower track students equal opportunity to high-status knowledge, which means access to “a combination of skills, experiences, attitudes, and academic content needed to create an informed and productive member of society” (p.274).

Goodlad and Oakes summarized their observations by concluding that they never witnessed good instruction in the lower level classes and surmised that such may not be possible given the constraints of the learners. It seems true then that the attitudes, abilities, and behaviors of the lower track students impede quality instruction and make such classes more difficult to teach. Nevi (1987) points out however, “ that these conditions do not magically improve when the students are scattered among untracked classes. They only become hidden from view and easier to ignore. Appropriate tracking is an attempt to structure situations in which the students’ special needs and abilities can be recognized and considered. Inappropriate tracking assumes that low-track students are not capable of acquiring high-status knowledge, and they must be given something else” (p.275).

As more research is revealed relative to the advantages and disadvantages of tracking, several psychologically related concerns have also appeared in the discourse about tracking. Researchers are agreed that we have long known that students tend to perform in relation to the expectations of the teacher, particularly if they respect the teacher, and regardless of their ability. Tracking experts contend however, that students in the lower track tend to display less motivation to succeed as a result of being housed with other students who are of like ability and interest. Mallery and Mallery (1999) report, “critics of tracking point out that there is a huge disparity between middle-school aspirations of some minority groups and their actual opportunities to fulfill their dreams” (p14). For example, 64 percent of African-Americans expect to complete college, but far less than half of those students are able to even enroll in college preparatory courses.

The data suggest the detrimental effects of lowered expectations are rampant in America’s schools. Approximately 85 percent of higher tracked students attend college, but fewer than 20 percent of lower tracked students do the same. “ Critics argue that tracking’s psychological effects, coupled with its static placement procedures, predestines low-ranked children for failure” (Mallery and Mallery, 1999, p.14). Jeannie Oakes (1986), known to be a leading expert on tracking states, “ the practice of tracking provides evidence of how schools, even as they voice commitment to equality and excellence, organize and deliver curriculum in ways that advance neither” (p.262). She believes

many schools track students believing that tracking allows schools to better match services with the needs of students, and that tracking promotes higher achievement for all students in an environment that creates equity for all. However, Oakes continues by saying, “rather than promoting higher achievement, tracking contributes to mediocre schooling for most secondary students because it places the greatest obstacles to achievement in the path of those children least advantaged in American society” (p.262). A further assumption claims that, “less capable students will suffer emotional as well as educational damage from daily classroom contact and competition with their brighter peers” (Oakes, 1986, p.264).

Positive Effects

Conversely, supporters of tracking reveal numerous positive attributes, particularly relative to the ability grouping format. For example, convincing evidence exists that support grouping of higher tracked students promotes achievement at increased rates when grouping occurs with students of similar ability. Additional research indicates positive effects of tracking for Asian American and white students for similar reasons. Although low-tracked students suffer from inadequate funding, more inexperienced teachers, lower academic standards, and pedagogical stagnancy, advocates of tracking suggest favorable effects of tracking if such misuses were corrected. In Taiwan schools, for example, low-performing students were found to perform at higher than expected levels if parameters in the school were controlled to eliminate the discrimination factor low-performing students often encounter. Mallery and Mallery (1999) suggest that, “students who tested low were greatly motivated to move up the grouping ranks” (p.14). Therefore when students are homogeneously placed, race and ethnic barriers break down to make students feel less disenfranchised. Mallery and Mallery further state, “tracking, if divorced from its society’s inequalities and prejudices, might prove to be an effective educational methodology” (p.15). Some studies show for instance that tracking based upon kinetic, spatial, verbal or musical interest areas can be effective given the proper structure.

Educators uphold several positive assumptions about tracking, such as the fact that it promotes overall achievement. One assumption is that placing students in groups of similar ability will allow teachers to better meet their needs and therefore build on their previous learnings. Many see tracking as the best structural method for meeting the individual differences in abilities. The assumption attached to this requires students to be ability grouped so that those differences can be accommodated to the fullest extent by the school. Oakes (1986) states that,

“it is also widely assumed that students can be placed in tracks and groups both accurately and fairly” (p.264). She further adds, “most teachers and administrators contend that tracking greatly eases the teaching task and is, perhaps, the only way to manage student differences” (p.264). She also claims, “lowered self-concepts and negative attitudes toward learning are widely considered to be consequences of mixed-ability for slower learners” (p.264). This further supports the notion that similar- ability grouping is advantageous if structured properly.

Research

Let’s take a look now at what the research tells us about evidence in support of tracking. Oakes (1986) states,

“At the risk of over-simplifying a complex body of research literature, it is safe to conclude that there is little evidence to support any of the assumptions about tracking. The effects of tracking on student outcomes have been widely investigated, and the bulk of this work does not support commonly held beliefs that tracking increases student learning. Nor does the evidence support tracking as a way to improve students’ attitudes about themselves or about schooling.

Although existing tracking systems appear to provide advantages for students who are placed in the top tracks, the literature suggests that students at all ability levels can achieve at least as well in heterogeneous classrooms” (p.264).

Unfortunately, tracking seems to retard the academic progress, and indeed lower IQ scores of middle and lower tracked students over a prolonged period of time. Research also indicates no clear advantage for vocational students, and a clear disadvantage relative to their preparation for the job market and overall employability status. Oakes (1986) further points out, “most tracking research does not support the assumption that slow students suffer emotional strains when enrolled in mixed-ability classes” (p.264). She adds, “Tracking can reduce self-esteem, lower aspirations, and foster negative attitudes toward school. Some studies have also concluded that tracking leads low-track students to misbehave and eventually to drop out altogether” (p.265). She claims, “the net effect of tracking is to exaggerate the initial differences among students rather than to provide the means to better accommodate them” (p.265). We have

learned that students originally possessing similar skills before being tracked exhibit more differentiated skills and aspirations after being exposed to a tracking system.

Let's now examine some very specific information and examples of tracking systems and the data from studies in the United States and abroad. The first study, entitled *A Study of Schooling* (Goodlad, 1983), studied 38 schools across the United States. This study examined some very specific information about the knowledge and skills students were taught in tracked classes and the differences in learning experiences in tracked situations. A representative group of approximately 300 English and math classes were studied involving a well-balanced mixture of low, middle and high level students. Three areas of the school structure were studied: curriculum content, instructional quality, and classroom climate. According to Oakes (1986), "they found remarkable and disturbing differences between classes in different tracks. These included important discrepancies in student access to knowledge, in their classroom instructional opportunities, and in their classroom learning environments" (p.267).

In both English and math classes significant discrepancies were noted in the students' access to different types of knowledge and the opportunities to develop a variety of intellectual skills. High track students have access to higher-level knowledge, which include college preparatory skills. Such skills include studying classic and modern fiction, characteristics of literary genres, elements of good narrative writing, writing thematic essays, and high level vocabulary indicative of a college preparatory class. Oakes (1986) adds, "the high track students in the sample had the most opportunities to think critically and to solve interesting problems" (p.267). Low track English classes rarely, if ever, had similar opportunities to encounter the same type of knowledge and skills. In fact, they were generally not expected to attain the same skills. These students wrote simple paragraphs, completed worksheets, and filled out job applications. They typically were asked to memorize low-level information or simply repeat information that they had been taught. The motivation to think beyond the surface level was sorely lacking. Oakes (1986) states, "The differences in mathematics content followed much the same pattern. High- tracked classes focused primarily on mathematical concepts; low-track classes stressed basic computational skills and math facts" (p.267). She further adds, "Much of the curriculum of low-track classes was likely to lock students into a continuing series of such bottom-level placements because important concepts and skills were neglected. Thus these students were denied the knowledge that would enable them to move successfully into higher-track classes" (p.267).

Relative to instructional time and teaching quality, marked differences were once again noted between the high and low tracks. Data on class time

indicate that high tracked students received more while low tracked students got less. High-level classes exhibited more class time for learning, and certainly more class time was dedicated to learning activities.

Additional differences were noted in classroom climate with regard to the area of relationships. Oakes (1986) states, "students in low-track classes agreed far more often that 'students in this class are unfriendly to me' or that 'I often feel left out of class activities'" (p.268). These students also complained of frequent interruptions due to class disturbances and a general feeling of dislike among the students within the class. Conversely, the students in the higher tracks were involved much more in class, and generally displayed a liking for each other. Disturbingly, students in the lower tracks seemed unaffected by receiving failing grades and generally displayed less regard for academic achievement. Sadly the conclusion is that those students needing the most positive, supportive, nurturing environment received it the least amount of time. This, in and of itself, is a very disturbing argument against tracking. Interestingly, students in mixed-ability groups relayed favorable comments about their educational experiences. Research also showed that their experiences often mirrored those of the high-tracked students, and that overall the students looked favorably upon that type of heterogeneous grouping. Oakes (1986) adds, "students' achievements, attitudes, interests, perceptions of themselves, and behaviors help produce some of the effects of tracking" (p.269). She concludes, adding, "the obvious conclusion about the effects of these track-specific differences on the ability of the schools to achieve academic excellence is that students who are exposed to less content and lower quality teaching are unlikely to get the full benefit out of their schooling. Yet this less-fruitful experience seems to be the norm when average and low-achieving students are grouped together for instruction" (p.269).

While tracking is intended to promote educational equality and accommodate individual differences, the contrary is unfortunately often true in that students are not provided the curriculum and instruction they need to maximize their potential and to achieve academic excellence. "Certainly students bring differences with them to school, but by tracking, schools help to widen rather than narrow those differences" (Oakes, 1986, p.270).

The research of Ellen Fiedler, Richard Lange, and Susan Winebrenner reveals some very interesting information relative to the advantages and disadvantages of tracking gifted students. Their work indicates that the gifted student actually feels out of place in the mixed level classroom in that they tend to be more knowledgeable than their peers and consequently tend to unknowingly dominate the regular classroom. Whereas there are benefits for the entire class to have a few gifted students in each classroom, there are distinct disadvantages for the gifted student in this situation. The authors (2002) state, "unless gifted students are placed in situations where they can be challenged by intellectual peers, the possibilities that they will develop an elitist attitude might well be expected to increase" (p.109). Conversely, evidence exists that shows a humbling environment exists when gifted students are grouped because they are often stunned at each other's knowledge level. Overall however, Fiedler, Lange, and Winebrenner (2002) state, "gifted educators have known for years that gifted students benefit cognitively and affectively from working with other gifted students" (p.110). In the absence of challenging material, gifted students have

great difficulty learning how to learn, and subsequently do not learn the necessary skills to be successful in their future academic endeavors.

In conclusion, one can quickly ascertain why tracking is one of the most controversial issues in education today. However, clearly the evidence points to more negative than positive research on this topic. As with most issues in education, parents will favor the strategy most advantageous for their child, which would clearly explain why more affluent, well-educated families would support the higher-level learner being segregated into an advanced ability group or track. It certainly advantages those students and prepares them to maintain the societal hierarchy that so strongly reigns in our country today. Researchers say that in the absence of a better system to accommodate the diverse ability levels of all of our students the tracking system will continue to prevail.

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