

Ability Grouping/Tracking

Presented by

Michael Frazier and Wendy Simmons

November 28, 2001

Ability grouping or tracking is a subject that causes heated debates between educators. Ability grouping is most frequently used by elementary schools to group reading instruction. Students are organized into groups within classes, and each group's reading proficiency determines instruction. Tracking is the term most commonly used for ability grouping students in middle schools and high schools. Instead of grouping students within their class, most students are grouped in separate classes that reflect differences in student's prior learning. For example, a student that is excelling in science or math may be in an advanced placement course, while another student who struggles with reading may take a remedial course.

When we attempt to trace the history of ability grouping, there is not a single person or a particular educational philosophy that we can point to and say, "This is where it came from." Ability grouping was conceived during a time of rapid change in the United States. The schools of the late nineteenth century were a potpourri of common schools, private secondary academies, and later, public high schools. According to Jeannie Oakes, author of Keeping Track, until 1860, fewer than 10% of the nation's fourteen to seventeen year olds attended private or public secondary schools which were scattered throughout the country, each offering a different curriculum. (Oakes 17).

At the turn of the century, many new social, economic, and intellectual demands were placed upon the public school systems. The flood of immigrants into America and stringent child labor laws forced employers to allow children to attend school increased the population of the burgeoning urban schools. Many of these children spoke different languages, practiced hygiene and dressed differently than the Americans, and had parents who expressed varying opinions on exactly what should be taught in the classroom. The

solution “ultimately settled upon was the comprehensive high school—a new secondary school that promised something for everyone, but . . . did not promise the *same* thing for every one” (Oakes 21). The nineteenth century ideal that teaching a common knowledge would build a unified nation was gone. It was replaced with the idea that curriculum differentiation or tracking/ability grouping was the way that schools should be organized. There were several important factors that influenced this idea. The social influences included the idea that a powerful group of white Anglo-Saxon individuals, known as Social Darwinists, possessed evolutionary supremacy over their ethnic counterparts. Tracking only made sense to these misguided people who believed that they were the “fittest” and “most civilized.” Keeping races separated into classrooms seemed to be a good way to acculturate the new settlers who had received little or no education in their homelands. The major economic influence sprang from the turn-of-the-century’s love of assembly line efficiency that had turned America into an industrial giant. Oakes notes, “It was seductive, as schools became large, to think of them as factories that could use efficient and scientific methods to turn the raw material—children—into finished products—educated adults” (Oakes 30). Of course, the success of the school’s “finished products” weren’t measured by the quality of gained knowledge, but by how many children could go through the system and by how much money was spent to achieve this outcome. Initially, students were grouped according to their ethnicity. Later, this developed into sorting students according to intellectual abilities within their ethnic groups. Into the twentieth century, students were tested and then placed into ability groups relying on their test scores in different subject areas. This is standard practice in many of today’s school systems.

There are several advantages to a track-based curriculum. One argument states that high ability students are not provided with challenging material in mixed ability classes. These students must be challenged in order for them to remain engaged in classroom activity. Also, some research has found that students placed into separate classes and given identical material to learn from has no effect on individual achievement. In other words, if students are tracked according to their corresponding ability level, it appears that student achievement is increased. This is the case especially for high ability students receiving high-accelerated curriculum. Another advantage to tracking is that in recent years, tracking in middle and high schools have been based more on student choice after certain prerequisites have been met. Perhaps most importantly, research reveals solid evidence that tracking among parents, teachers and students is popular.

There is also a negative side to tracking/ability grouping. According to Tom Loveless of the Fordham Foundation, “the primary charges against tracking are (1) it doesn’t accomplish anything and (2) that it unfairly creates unequal opportunities for academic achievement” (Loveless 2). In addition, Loveless states that opponents of ability grouping believe that this system “perpetuates race and class segregation by disproportionately assigning minority and poor children to low tracks and white, wealthy children to high tracks” (Loveless 10). Furthermore, parents who are from a higher socio-economic status tend to exert more influence over the placement of his or her child in a specific track. Additional “cons’ to tracking include matters such as the suggestion that high tracking students are given more of the school district’s financial resources than those in the lower tracks. Also, many believe that tracking locks students in to a specific

stratum that they are unable to move from during their education. Many educational psychologists argue that tracking harms students' self-esteem and that lower track classrooms use non-stimulating curricula. Depending on the research one reads, all of these complaints can be legitimized or can be disregarded. However, many articles seem to agree on one fact—that minority and low-income students **are** placed into lower tracks more frequently than their more wealthy and Euro-American peers (Loveless 10).

Research suggests that the assignment of students to tracks is based not only on academic considerations, which would lead to near homogeneous groupings, but also on nonacademic factors. Academic factors that influence track placement are grades, scores on standardized tests, teachers' and counselors' recommendations, prior track placement, and course prerequisites. Nonacademic considerations include course conflicts, co-curricular and extra-curricular schedules, work demands, and teacher and curricular resources. The tracking of students varies from school to school, depending on how they weigh each factor of the tracking process to determine the track of each student. One researcher suggests that track assignments tend to be less permanent than is commonly believed and feels that it is not uncommon for a student to change tracks during a school year and from one school year to the next. Although much research has been done, the result of a tracked education is inconclusive. During the past century a number of studies into tracking that has failed to determine the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of ability grouping on a child's education.

As seen in the following research conducted by Tom Loveless, tracking is used extensively in middle school starting with only some accelerated courses such as math or English being offered to advanced students.

Tracking in Middle Grades, 1988
(% of schools that track)

Tracking in...	5 th Grade	6 th Grade	7 th Grade	8 th Grade
All Subjects	23	22	22	23
Some Subjects	40	44	47	50
No Subjects	37	34	31	27

When principals were asked: "For which academic subjects are students assigned to homogeneous classes on the basis of similar abilities or achievement levels?"

8th Grade Math Enrollment, 1996

Algebra	24%
Pre-Algebra	27%
8 th Grade Math	44%
Other	5%

In the same survey Students were asked, "What kind of mathematics class are you taking this year?"

Tracking in High Schools

Tracking in High School Mathematics, 1993

School Type	Classification	Course Offerings	Percent of Schools
A	Traditionally Tracked	3 tracks	39.1 %
B	Traditionally Tracked	2 Tracks	18.4%
C	Mixed	3 Tracks + Heterogeneous	10.7%
D	Mixed	2 Tracks + Heterogeneous	10.4%
E	Mixed	1 Track + Heterogeneous	7.0%
F	Untracked	Heterogeneous Classes	13.5%

10th Grade Track Enrollment, 1990

(% of students, course classified by track label)

	Math	English	Science	Social Studies
Honors	9.9	16.7	11.3	12.2
Academic	52.8	33.0	42.8	38.9
General	30.9	42.6	41.0	44.8
Vocational	3.6	2.4	1.7	1.4

Other	2.8	5.3	3.3	2.7
-------	-----	-----	-----	-----

Teachers were asked: "Which of the following best describes the 'track' this class is considered to be? Academic, advanced or honors, general, vocational/technical/business, or other?"

Overall, ability grouping seems to benefit those who are put into a gifted or high-achiever track. Usually, this group constitutes the smallest numerical ability group within a classroom, grade, or school. A comprehensive study published in Educational Leadership in 1991 reveals that students tracked in a "within-class ability group" clearly benefit by displaying "positive academic effects" when compared to an untracked classroom (Allan 2). The practice of "comprehensive full day grouping" of students into different classrooms based on an I.Q. test or other criteria fails to reveal any positive effects (Allan 2) except among the gifted student track. Allan reports that this high-track performed better in their own class than they did in heterogeneous classes. (Allan 2). In her book, Keeping Track, Oakes details responses that were given by a variety of high school students from varying ability groups from English, math, and science classes. Oakes posed this question: "What is the most important thing you have learned or done so far in this class?" Students from the higher tracks wrote:

- "I've learned to study completely, and to know everything there is to know."
- "How to organize myself and present an argument."
- "To understand concepts and ideas and experiment with them. Also to work independently."

Low-track students gave these answers:

- "Manners."
- "Working on my P's and Q's."
- "How to shut up." (Oakes 87-89)

Oakes admits that these answers themselves don't imply anything but she encourages her reader to consider the possible "meanings of the trends" (89). She argues, "Why would adolescents considered to be of low-ability consider learning "to be less outspoken" or "to cope with frustration" or "to keep themselves clean" among the most critical things they have learned throughout the school year? (90). Certainly, the apparent effects of tracking must be considered by educators in order to lessen the potentially damaging consequences to some students. More importantly, we, as future teachers must consider our own bias and prejudices about student ability before we work with any student population—no matter what track they are in.

Works Cited/ Works Consulted

Allan, Susan Demirsky. "Ability Grouping Research Reviews: What Do They Say About Grouping and the Gifted?" Educational Leadership. March 1991:56-61.

Harlen, Wynne. "Making Sense of the Research on Ability Grouping." SCRE Website. Available: www.scre.ac.uk/rie/n160/n160harlen.html.

Hereford, Nancy. "Making Sense of Ability Grouping." Instructor. May-June 1993: 50-53.

Loveless, Tom. "The Tracking and Ability Grouping Debate." The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation Website. Available: www.edexcellence.net/library/track.html#anchor21630

Loveless, Tom. "Will Tracking Promote Social Equity?" Educational Horizons. 56 1999:28-32

Oakes, Jeannie. Keeping Track. Yale University Press: 1985