

Alternatives to Tracking

Studies of schools' attempts to soften the detrimental effects of tracking indicate that reform may come about through modifications to tracking, rather than by its outright elimination.

To call some students "academic" and others "nonacademic" has a devastating impact on how teachers think about students and how students think about themselves. The message to some is: *you are the intellectual leaders, you will go on to further education*. To others it is *you are not academic, you are not smart enough to do this work*. Students are thus divided between those who think and those who work, when, in fact, life for all of us is a blend of both.

—From *An Imperiled Generation*, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1988.

Education researchers and theorists regularly prescribe doing away with tracking, but it continues to be used almost universally in high schools and is becoming increasingly prominent in middle and elementary schools.¹ Recent reports on restructuring schools list tracking on their agendas for change; many call for "modifications" in tracking rather than its outright elimination.² These more circumscribed approaches may have a better chance of success because they take into account forces on each side of the issue.

The Basic Assumption

Schools use tracking to accommodate instruction to the range of student

needs, interests, and abilities. The assumption is that students will learn best when the instructional content is matched well to individual knowledge and abilities. Students are divided into homogeneous learning groups so that teachers can offer lessons that no student finds too hard or too easy. This, they think, should maximize student motivation and learning.

The term *tracking* is most often used to refer to between-class homo-

geneous grouping of students. A number of other variations of within-class and between-class grouping practices have been described in the research literature (Slavin 1989, Oakes 1989). Grouping in elementary schools is often accomplished *within* a heterogeneous class by forming smaller subgroups for instruction, such as the three reading groups that exist in most early elementary classes. Middle and high schools typically form homogeneous groups between rather than within classes, by assigning students to classrooms according to their recent performance on tests or their report card grades. High school students are often assigned first to differentiated curriculum programs, such as academic or college prep, general, and vocational, and then to separate classes within these programs based on further assessments of student needs and abilities.

The Detrimental Effects

Arguments against tracking usually emphasize that separate, tracked classes receive unequal shares of the key formal and informal aspects of a good learning environment.

Weaker learning environments.

Lower track classrooms are usually assigned the least experienced teachers, even though they enroll the students with the greatest needs, who may be the

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most challenging to teach. Indeed, some districts and schools, by allowing their most senior teachers to choose the tracks they wish to teach, often create weaker learning environments for students with the greatest need.

Lowered expectations. Students in lower track classes are often stigmatized by a schoolwide attitude that they are not capable learners. When such negative images are shared by lower track teachers and their students, certain instructional consequences follow: fewer curriculum units are covered, the pace of instruction is slower, fewer demands are made for learning higher-order skills, and test and homework requirements are taken less seriously (Oakes 1985, Mitchell 1989).

Cumulative losses. Tracking actually widens the gap in achievement between students in the top and bottom levels over time (Goodlad 1983). A student who is first assigned to a bottom class has an even poorer chance to move up to a higher track at the next grade level. So for those at the bottom, the effects of tracking produce slower and slower rates of learning and smaller and smaller chances of receiving better track assignments. Naturally the cumulative losses are greatest when tracking starts in the early elementary grades.

Resegregation. Tracking can undermine efforts to desegregate schools, because students from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds are most likely to wind up in lower tracks (Epstein 1985). Thus, in racially mixed schools, tracking usually produces resegregation of black and white students into different classes within the school, with fewer chances for minority students to progress to high school completion and college enrollment.

Resistance to change. There are powerful forces in many schools and districts who perceive tracking to be in their own best interests. Often when the elimination of tracking is proposed, parents of the highest achieving students and senior teachers are the most outspoken opponents of doing away with it.³

Pragmatic Alternatives

Modifications and alternatives to tracking can address teachers' desires to match instruction to student abilities, without the gross educational inequalities that often accompany lower-tracked classes and without ignoring the legitimate needs of exceptional children. Based on recent research reviews on this topic (Gamoran and Berends 1987, Oakes 1989, Slavin 1989) and information from schools and districts that are struggling with the issue⁴, we offer these recommendations.

1. **Postpone tracking.** Tracking should be deferred as late in the grade span as possible. Elementary grades should feature within-class methods of adapting instruction to student needs (such as within-class ability groups in mathematics or reading and cooperative techniques) or certain cross-age regrouping approaches that emphasize direct instruction in basic subjects.

2. **Limit tracking.** In the later grades tracking should be limited to those basic academic subjects where students' differences in skill levels are clear detriments to whole class instruction. Research indicates (Slavin 1989) that between-class grouping plans in the later elementary grades are most beneficial when students remain in heterogeneous classes most of the day and are regrouped only in mathematics or reading on the basis of their current skills in each specific subject. It is reasonable to predict that a similarly limited use of tracking would be effective in the middle and high school grades, perhaps restricted even further to subjects that have specific prerequisite requirements at each step of learning.

3. **Create better placement criteria.** The use of a single criterion, such as a student's rank or overall report card average, to determine the general track placement for his or her entire academic program almost always constitutes the misuse of tracking. Tracking makes sense only if it helps students learn better by creating a stronger learning environment more closely matched to their current needs. Criteria for individual students' course assignments should be current

and differentiated—the placement of a student in an upper level math course and in a lower level English course (or vice versa) should not be unusual. At a minimum, separate recent tests or grades in each tracked subject should be used. School and district officials should regularly review distribution placements in tracked subjects by sex and ethnicity to guard against placement biases.

4. **Experiment with new methods of placement.** Schools and districts should try offering middle and high school students incentives for taking challenging courses. For example, teachers might encourage students to move to upper level courses by offering them interesting grading options (pass-fail or extra credits for certain offerings).

5. **Minimize separate offerings for special needs students.** Separate offerings for gifted students, limited-English-proficient students, and special education students can be retained at each grade level along with the program of limited tracking described above. But such separate offerings are themselves a version of general curriculum tracking, and they should be clearly restricted to meeting the needs of exceptional children.

Improvements in Untracked Classes

Some methods for improving untracked classes are offered below.

1. **Provide extra help.** Teachers should offer extra help to any student having serious difficulties. For example, additional coaching sessions or peer tutoring services within the regular school schedule could prevent course failures.

2. **Equip teachers with useful teaching methods.** Cooperative learning techniques that actively involve all students from a heterogeneous class in learning activities are effective ways to improve achievement (Slavin 1986, Newmann and Thompson 1987, Cohen 1986). Mastery learning methods can also deliver extra help and provide extra chances for success to selected students within heterogeneous classes (Block and Anderson 1975)

3. *Expand all students' opportunities.* All students should be able to earn good grades. Students should be rewarded for individual effort and progress regardless of their starting points. They should also be able to demonstrate their competence through different avenues, not merely the traditional linear-sequential modes.

4. *Find alternatives to tracking.* Other innovations in secondary school scheduling and student evaluation policies, such as continuous progress programs where students can complete course units at different rates, can be used to adapt heterogeneous class grouping to individual student differences (Carnegie Council 1989, Boyer 1983).

Making Tracking Reform Happen

There are many innovative and effective alternatives to tracking. San Diego, for example, has implemented (1) an "equity and student placement policy" aimed at ensuring a balanced representation of student subgroups across curricular programs and (2) a "common core curriculum" designed to eliminate the less challenging mathematics courses and have all students take courses such as algebra and geometry (Lytle 1989). Oakland has focused on strengthening the curriculum and instruction in both mathematics and English and is addressing student access to courses and teacher expectations.

In an effort to "eliminate the gross and subtle mechanisms by which schools differentiate the academic careers of [African-American] and white children," the Norfolk school district has undertaken a review of all their programs and services. Along different lines, Pittsburgh has eliminated the general education track in its high schools and greatly strengthened and updated its vocational (applied technology) education program and middle school career counseling services in order to provide better and more marketable training to non-college bound youth.

On a smaller scale, local schools are also implementing innovative alternatives. Recently, in collaboration with

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the National Education Association, we surveyed a group of such schools (Slavin et al. 1989) and found three major types of changes at the elementary level. The most prevalent changes were experiments with whole-class instruction in reading. Other schools had instituted flexible, usually cross-grade, grouping plans, such as continuous-progress, Joplin, or ungraded primary plans, often with a strong mainstreaming emphasis. Still other schools reported moving from homogeneous to heterogeneous grouping.

Several of the middle and high schools in the Hopkins/NEA study described efforts to reduce the number of ability groups while still maintaining two or three groups for some or all subjects. For example, one middle school principal described a plan in which the top track remained separate but the other classes (three of the four sections) were heterogeneously mixed and given the same curriculum. And one of the senior high schools also reduced the number of tracks, placing most students in a large, fairly heterogeneous group.

A few schools used completely heterogeneous grouping in all subjects and grade levels: one is a small K-12 school in which every class is heterogeneous; another is a magnet school for drama in a large urban district. A

second magnet school in the same city uses cooperative learning, individualized instruction, and flexible ability grouping. Both of these magnet schools serve predominantly Hispanic and African-American students. A K-9 university lab school also reported using heterogeneous grouping for all subjects.

Some of the middle school respondents also have implemented ambitious mainstreaming plans, combining special education and gifted students in cooperative learning groups to enhance the higher-order thinking skills of both. Surprisingly, the teachers and administrators interviewed in our survey were almost uniformly positive about their efforts to reduce tracking.

The Bottom Line

Modifications that lead to a combination of tracked and untracked classes may best initiate tracking reform. These include placing sensible limitations and restrictions on tracked offerings, better use of resources to support the learning of students in lower tracks, and implementing changes in untracked classes to help them work better for all students.

Tracking as practiced in many American schools and districts is clearly in need of reform, but turning the suggestions for reform into action will not be easy. In considering their policies concerning this practice, educators would do well to listen to arguments both for and against tracking. Only by listening to both sides can they recognize—and address—the norms and interests that have sustained tracking practices. □

¹See Braddock (1989) and Maryland State Department of Education (1989).

²See Children's Defense Fund (1988), Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989), Maryland State Department of Education (1989), and Boyer (1983).

³See McPartland and Crain (1987), Oakes (1989), and Slavin et al. (1989). For accounts of political battles over tracking reforms, see Frey (1988).

⁴Jomills H. Braddock and Robert E. Slavin, with the support of the National Education Association, are conducting a project to identify and describe schools that have minimized tracking. A full report

on the findings will be available in early 1990 (See also Slavin et al., 1989). For a discussion of district policies and practices that impact on tracking in large urban school systems, see Lytle 1989.

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