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Michael Kintz
College of DuPage

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Ability Grouping and How It Is Affecting American Classrooms

by Michael Kintz

(Education 1100)

As Americans we are used to having our voices heard about issues that go on in our country. Some of the issues that people voice their opinions or complaints about usually are about the United States job market, the economic status of the United States, the lowering and raising of taxes, and the big hot topic is always education. The United States is the leader of the industrialized countries of the world in many aspects and yet our school scores pale in comparison to other industrialized countries. Our country looks to a new generation of leaders for this country but when our public school systems are failing these children, how can we expect anything great out of the generations to come. Students in American public schools fall prey to a system called tracking or otherwise known as streaming. This system starts out with an honest purpose of handing out a higher education to students but what it really does is hold students back as they get stuck in these groups throughout their education, even while going through high school. In order to have our voices heard and have this tracking problem corrected we need to know what tracking is, the benefit of tracking, the negative consequences of tracking, and ultimately what other solutions may be available to replace tracking with.

Tracking is a system that starts out in most public elementary schools as a way to find out what reading level the students of a class are at. “For reading, this practice typically involves teachers organizing ‘students into small reading groups according to reading level as determined by informal assessments, teacher judgments, and/or standardized tests’” (Chorzempa, Graham, 2006, p. 529). Once this skill level is determined the students are usually split up and attend classes only with students whose reading level matches their own. This is good at an early age for students because it eases them into reading with other students that are at the same level as themselves. This way the students in the low track reading are not feeling overwhelmed with reading that is above them, and the high track readers are not feeling unfulfilled with their education. This sounds like a good system for students who are just beginning their education and there are several important benefits that come out of the tracking system. One of these benefits is that the teachers are now more able to direct the lessons they are creating and teaching towards the specific ability level of the students in their class. If the teachers didn’t have the separation of tracking then it would be absolutely “absurd to expect all children to tackle the same degree of difficulty as it is to give them the same size shoes” (Raveaud, 2005, p. 468). This allows for a more direct teaching approach which the students ultimately gain from by being taught subject matter at an academic level that is more comfortable for them. Another advantage of separating students up is that the work being done by the students is only being compared to other similar ability students in the same class as one another. By the students having their work compared to other similar-ability students this prevents the possibility of lower-ability students from having their self-esteem lowered from having their work compared with higher ability students in a mixed-ability classroom setting. The next advantage of tracking is that the high-ability students tend to do even better in these tracked classes than they would in mixed – ability classes. According to Kulik and Kulik (1992) high-ability students that are in tracked classes tend to achieve more highly than similar-ability students in non-tracked classes. This separation by ability level also creates less stress for low-ability students who would normally be in a mixed-ability class. Being in a mixed ability classroom is a stressor for the low-ability students because it puts more pressure on them by being in a class where there are other students who are doing better than they are.

Even though there are advantages to the tracking system the disadvantages outweigh the positives. The roadblocks that are put in front of students in a tracking system can hinder their education greatly. One of the first blocks these students encounter is choosing friends and peer groups. It seems absurd to think that students might choose different friends and social connections based somewhat based upon another person's tracking status. Research reveals that "friendship choices are influenced by membership in reading groups; thus, low- and high-achieving students are limited to same-ability friendships" (Moody, Vaughn, & Schumm, 1997, p.2). Another hindrance set up by the tracking system is a sad testament to how far our country has come because the low-track groups in a tracking system are usually comprised of minorities and students with a low socioeconomic status. If a student comes from a poor economic background or is a minority of this country, those factors do not directly relate to their academic capabilities. This country has already learned that lesson from the case *Lau v. Nichols* in which Lau sued the California school system because students, including his child, were doing poorly in school because of the language barrier. When the school system set up a program that helped the students overcome this barrier all of the students scored higher on their tests and grades improved dramatically. The final issue, and one of the biggest issues to most critics of tracking, is that the tracking system allows for little or no movement. No, students are not literally bound to their desks because of tracking. What is meant by the statement of "little or no movement" is that students once placed in a certain tracking ability level almost never leave that level of learning. What happens is the students start off in elementary school being "tracked" into reading groups but these reading groups ultimately end up determining the vein of academia the student is taught for the rest of their education. It is possible that certain students may move out of a low-ability group and into an average or high-ability group, but it is not a common case for that to happen. So these students that start off in a low-ability track end up staying there for they have not been challenged or pushed as much as the students of a high-track group. Isn't one of the reasons to get an education is so that we can make better lives for ourselves and others? How are the students who are practically stuck in these low-ability groups supposed to climb higher when the system that is supposed to help them is literally pushing them and holding them to stay right where they are?

There are many critics for and against tracking with reasons to back either side of the argument for or against tracking. Even though there seems to be positive factors for tracking systems the negative factors and outcomes of tracking greatly outweigh the few advantages. One of the downsides to tracking that strikes a major chord is the fact that students can't always find a way out of low-ability groups that they are put into in elementary school. It's unfair to students who are in low-ability groups are not always receiving the same motivation and challenges that students almost always receive in the higher-ability groups. Another downfall of the tracking system that affects students but also reflects poorly on America is that the low-ability groups are mostly comprised of minorities and students from low-income families. This is not supposed to be the way things work in "the land of equal opportunity." People are supposed to have a fair chance at life in this country, since it's one of the founding principles of the United States, and yet students who are the future of our country are being held back in their education. There are ways of taking away the tracking system but this creates many issues for teachers and anyone else involved with the schools, which includes the students and parents. One of the main ways of getting rid of tracking is very plainly called detracking. This is where students are purposely placed in classes that are comprised of mixed-ability students. Studies have shown that "low-achieving students generally achieve more in heterogeneous classrooms" (Archibald, Keleher, 2008, p. 27). Another method of reformation is to have more engaging lessons for students who are kept in low-ability classes if the tracking system is kept in place. This way students that are in low-ability classes get the same type of involvement that students in a high-ability group receive. That way the students in the low-ability classes are engaged and interested in the curriculum which then allows more of an opportunity for the students to

hopefully move into the higher-track classes.

As our country moves forward it needs everyone one of its students that progresses through the school system to be prepared and well educated so that when their time comes they can lead this nation. But when students are being held in place by a system that does not allow for movement up to higher-ability groups, and tends to group students by race and socioeconomic status, isn't this country cheating them out of this opportunity of a great education? It's time that the voice is heard and a change for the better is made. Reforms exist that can make this happen, and positive changes need to be made; now it is only a matter of who is going to make it happen?

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