

4-1-2012

Tracking in Public Schools: The Discussion Continues

Chris Burkett
College of DuPage

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai>

Recommended Citation

Burkett, Chris (2013) "Tracking in Public Schools: The Discussion Continues," *ESSAI*: Vol. 10, Article 13.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol10/iss1/13>

This Selection is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at DigitalCommons@C.O.D.. It has been accepted for inclusion in ESSAI by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@C.O.D.. For more information, please contact koteles@cod.edu.

Tracking in Public Schools: The Discussion Continues

by Chris Burkett

(Education 1100)

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explain the process of tracking in public schools. Tracking is a very difficult topic to uncover, and has many sides for and against. The subject is too intertwined to just take one side or the other. It is hard not to take a stand for such an important topic though. In the articles researched for the paper, most leaned towards tracking being antiquated, but none could completely dispel its usefulness. The articles were mostly cognitive psychological research publications. They had done extensive research in the results of homogenous compared to heterogeneous classrooms. This paper explores both sides of the topic.

Keywords: tracking, homogeneous vs. heterogeneous classrooms, self-esteem

The element of tracking is a controversial topic in the public school system today. Some parents spend much time and energy checking into school districts in an area where they may potentially buy a new home. People spend huge amounts of money on a home in a good school district. Others, because of social or monetary reasons may not have the luxury of picking out the best school district for their children. Still, with all of this effort it is possible for a student that is in a good school district to receive an education that will not prepare them for college due to tracking. Most parents are not aware of the fact that school administrations sort children by the level of learning that they have at that time. According to Van Houtte & Stevens, (2009), there are two reasons for tracking. The first reason being it is easier to teach a group of like-minded students. Second, not everyone is going to college and people need to be trained for different paths in life. The problem with the latter theory is this, when in your life do you decide the path that you are going to take? Based upon this uncertainty, if you show that your skills might be geared more towards a trade school at a young age you will not be prepared to go to college after you graduate high-school.

Every student that comes into the public school system is not going to be on the same level. How, then, should the schools decide what to do with a group of students that is on a high level when it comes to math, science or English; or a lower level also with math, science or English? Tracking is a process that public schools use to sort students into groups that are in the same realm of learning capability. Students that are more advanced will be put into advanced placement classes or college bound preparatory classes. This means that they will probably receive a satisfactory education in which they can go onto college and have a good chance of succeeding with the skills needed academically. The lower level students will also be tracked into a class, often called remedial. This means that they are not as advanced as the higher level students or can possibly mean that they are from a poverty stricken family; a minority, or just that they don't learn the same as everyone else.

Tracking is an older approach to a modern problem. The importance of this decision cannot be diminished because each student involved will have to deal with these repercussions the rest of their life. Some people believe that students learn better in a homogenous classroom, where everyone is on the same level and the teacher can go at the speed that everyone in the class needs. In a journal article by Trautwein, Ludtke, Marsh, Koller, & Baumert, (2006), the writers stated, "similarly, Marsh, Kong, and Hau have suggested that the academic self-concepts of students in academically selective classes may be enhanced by their basking in the reflected glory of the accomplishments or qualities of other group members," meaning a homogenous classroom. However, students may have been given a false sense of accomplishment, as the material learned, may not be up to the standards

that they may need to get through school later on. Others believe that students learn better in a heterogeneous classroom, where the students have mixed capabilities, and can learn from each other as well as from a more intense subject matter and more interactive teaching.

People feel strongly about this subject depending on the side with which they are personally involved. Parents of gifted children are usually against de-tracking. De-tracking is a term for putting students with varied learning levels together into a classroom. Parents are against this because they feel that it will mean a less stimulating or less challenging curriculum for their child. According to Hallinan, (2004) parents of higher tracked students find that their children achieve more while in tracked classrooms. The teachers are allowed to spend time in engaging material, and not as much time on remedial topics. Some teachers are also against de-tracking because they don't feel that they have the time or resources to give all of the students they have. If the teacher has to make more than one lesson plan, time as well as the quality of education given becomes a factor. Also Hallinan, (2004) believes that some teachers are supportive of tracking because of being able to prepare lesson plans for a balanced group.

Envision, for example, a school that leaves a group of students in remedial math from the fifth grade throughout high school. Does that child have the academic skill-set to succeed in college if the child wants? More than likely it means no. Either that child has to spend a few years before getting into college to catch up, which is very difficult to do, or work a job the rest of their life with nothing but a high-school diploma. In today's society this is increasingly difficult if not impossible in some parts of the country.

Now envision a school that mixes all students together into a classroom. The teacher uses all of their time to help children with addition and subtraction while the higher-level students are bored and unchallenged. Higher tracked students might go through school feeling that school is not for them because they hated going to classes that were not stimulating enough to keep their attention. The higher-level students work on worksheets and never really got to where they needed to be because the teacher was busy helping lower level students (Preckel, Gotz, & Frenzel, 2010, p.455). Higher tracked students are bored in school when not receiving the information to stimulate their minds. A more modern approach to help with this could be "flipping" the classroom. The idea is to use the Internet as a tool for instruction, while using the classroom time for tutoring or helping the students hands on. Programs are also being made that allow the students to do homework online, the system grades it, and the teacher sees exactly what area or areas the students need help in.

Teachers can make or break the entire academic career of a child. Either through the quality of instruction they give or through the self-image that the student can adopt during the time with the teacher. That is not to say that any teacher does not have students that they feel are better in a subject or are more engaging. According to Worthy, (2009), "Teachers were more likely to have negative feelings and lower expectations for lower achieving students, to offer them less support, and to communicate their lowered expectations to students...there is a distinct difference in perception that teachers have of students in lower level and higher level students." During the research done for the above mentioned journal article, Worthy asked a teacher to describe a normal day. The teacher asked if she meant the regular class or honors class. The teacher said that the "regulars don't even bring their homework, and I've given up on getting them to read at home. Their parents don't read; they don't see it modeled. The honors class is wonderful in every respect. Every teachers dream." It is plain to see the teacher feels different about the two groups. Will the lower tracked students have the same chance at success as the higher tracked students? The teacher has them stereotyped before the researcher even meets them.

Studies have found that lower level classes do not get the quality of instruction as the higher levels. (Worthy, 2009, p. 294) Low track classes are based upon conformity and behavior compared to higher tracked students being asked to participate in critical thinking and independent learning. The expectations are much higher for high tracked classes. Higher-level classes receive stimulating

instruction and many times worked together in interactive groups. In the interactive groups students are able to move around and discuss things out loud. This allows them to think on a much higher level than the basic knowledge tier according to Blooms Taxonomy, and they learn from each other as well as the teacher.

An important aspect of tracking is the self- esteem of the children themselves. Children are much more clever than adults sometimes give them credit for. They pay attention to differences in schools and what classes each student may go into. Children pick up the stereotypes that adults have and begin to judge each other's accomplishments to somehow make themselves feel superior. This can set a child up for low academic self- concept and lead to low self- esteem. If a child notices that he or she is in a class that has a reputation to be remedial or slow they will question, to themselves, "Is something wrong with me?" According to Kulik & Kulik, (1982), "tracking is said to confer an unnecessary distinction on those in the higher tracks while placing a stigma on those in the slower tracks."

Another problem with self- esteem of some students is that they begin to dislike school. According to Ireson & Hallam, (2009), "One important consequence of low academic self- concept is that students have negative intentions towards learning more in the future." Students that are routinely told that they are not smart enough to do a certain task, will believe that they are not smart enough to do said task. If a student feels as if they are wasting their time in a classroom they will find a way not to be there. Students can start skipping school, which only causes them to fall farther behind. Students can also get in with a troubled crowd. Feeling that if everyone already thinks they're a failure then they will try to become one. Some students just need someone to pay attention to them for any reason other than being the kid who does not do well in school. There are many reasons why self- esteem can become a problem. Teachers and parents should work to help children foster a good self-image or self worth. Furthermore, students can put themselves into "classes". If a child grows to think that they are not as important as the other children it may cause social disturbances later.

Children have to learn how to interact with others just like they learn math, science or English. It is something they learn on their own, but they must be exposed to everyone so that they can get used to dealing with everyone. Children need to learn from a young age that no one person is better than another for any reason. Each has specific goals or abilities which make everyone special, but a child that happens to be good at math or science is not better than a child who is better at drawing or music. Tracking also teaches separation of classes at a much too young age. These things set precedence for the children for years to come. Attitudes such as people thinking that they are better for any reason can lead to racism or bigotry.

In the research that was done for this paper most of the articles read said that tracking was not practiced much in the United States today. It is a system that was used in the past, but it received much publicity during the 1970's saying that it was not a fair system for the students. In some circles this seems to be the theory, but tracking is still widely used in areas of the United States. It has a strong hold in foreign countries and is quite prevalent in the school systems in Germany. The thing about tracking is that it may not be used intentionally, but it is reverted back to without realization. The topics discussed intended to show why it is such an important subject and what makes the process work or not work. Hopefully this research has been informational and will cause questions about this controversial topic.

References

- Alpert, B., & Bechar, S. (2008). School organizational efforts in search for alternatives to ability grouping. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24, 1599-1612.
- Hallam, S. (2008). Ability grouping in the secondary school: Attitudes of teachers and practically based subjects. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 31(2), 181-207.
- Hallinan, M. (2004). The detracking movement: *Education Next*, 4(4).
- Horn, D. (2009). Age of selection counts: a cross-country analysis of educational institutions. *Educational Research and Evaluation*, 15(4), 343-366.
- Ireson, J., & Hallam, S. (2009). Academic self-concepts in adolescence: Relations with achievement and ability grouping in schools. *Learning and Instruction*, 19, 201-213.
- Kulik, C. & Kulik, J. (1982). Effects of ability grouping on secondary school students: A meta-analysis of evaluation findings. *American Educational Research Journal*, 19, 415-428.
- Preckel, F., Gotz, T., & Frenzel, A. (2010). Ability grouping of gifted students: Effects on academic self-concept and boredom. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 80, 451-472.
- Solomon, Y. (2007). Experiencing mathematics classes: Ability grouping, gender and the selective development of participative identities. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 46, 8-19.
- Trautwein, U., Ludtke, O., Marsh, H., Koller, O., & Baumert, J. (2006). Tracking, grading, and student motivation: Using group composition and status to predict self-concept and interest in ninth-grade mathematics. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 98(4), 788-806.
- Van Houtte, M., & Stevens, P. A. (2009). *American Educational Research Journal*, 46(4), 943-973.
- Worthy, J. (2009). Only the names have been changed: Ability grouping revisited. *Urban Review*, 42, 271-295.