

The Tracking & Ability Grouping Debate

Tracking and ability grouping are common features of schools. They are also two of the most harshly criticized practices in American education. Both group students of similar achievement levels for instruction, but they differ in how this task is accomplished.

Ability Grouping - Elementary schools typically use ability grouping in reading instruction. Students are organized into groups within classes, creating "bluebirds" and "redbirds," for example, with instruction targeted to each group's reading level.

Tracking - Middle schools and high schools use tracking to group students between classes, offering courses in academic subjects that reflect differences in students' prior learning. One student who is an outstanding reader may take an honors English course, while another student who struggles with reading may take a remedial reading course. An eighth grade math whiz may tackle high school courses (algebra or geometry) while other pupils are still learning how to work with fractions.

The Debate

Tracking and ability grouping have fueled a debate spanning virtually the entire twentieth century. Tracking has received especially harsh criticism. Critics charge that tracking not only fails to benefit any student, but that it also channels poor and minority students into low tracks and dooms a vast number of students to an impoverished education. Defenders of tracking, on the other hand, argue that high ability students languish in mixed ability classes, that it is nearly impossible, for example, for teachers to lead students through the plot twists of King Lear while simultaneously instructing in phonics. In the last decade, a turning point in this debate occurred as education policy makers in several states launched initiatives to discourage tracking, recommending that schools place students of heterogeneous ability into the same classrooms. Across the nation, schools and districts have begun to de-track.

The primary charges against tracking are (1) that it doesn't accomplish anything and (2) that it unfairly creates unequal opportunities for academic achievement. What is the evidence? Generally speaking, research fails to support the indictment.

Efficacy

When students are ability grouped into separate classes and given an identical curriculum, there is no appreciable effect on achievement. But when the curriculum is adjusted to correspond to ability level, it appears that student achievement is boosted, especially for high ability students receiving an accelerated curriculum. Heterogeneous grouping has not been adopted by enough middle and high schools to conclude whether de-tracking produces achievement gains - for poor, minority, and low achieving students or anyone else. In sum,

research comparing tracking and heterogeneous grouping cannot conclusively declare one or the other as the better way of organizing students.

Fairness

The charge of unfairness more accurately depicts tracking's past than its present. In the past, tracking was rigid and deterministic. Schools assigned students to vocational, general, or academic tracks, thereby pre-determining students' entire high school experience - from start to finish and for all subjects. Today, schools rarely assign students to a regimen of college or vocational courses across subject areas. Instead, assignment to math tracks is based on math proficiency, English tracks on reading proficiency, etc. Moreover, most schools assign students to tracked classes based on student choice, once prerequisites have been met. And transcript studies show that most students may independently move up or down in each subject's hierarchy of courses, depending on their performance.

This does not mean that all of tracking's flaws have vanished. One criticism still appears valid: low tracks often emphasize good behavior and menial skills, while high tracks offer preparation for college. These differences in learning environments particularly depress the academic achievement of poor and minority students, who are assigned disproportionately to low tracks. In sharp contrast, Catholic high schools appear to provide low track students with a quality education, and they are remarkably successful in boosting low track students to higher levels.

Principles for Future Policy

State and district policies that condemn tracking cannot be reconciled with the research. Three principles should govern future policy:

Schools must be granted autonomy to decide grouping policies. Principals, teachers, and parents are in the best position to craft the grouping policies of any particular school, not policy-makers many miles away.

Tracked schools should work to improve themselves, primarily by insuring that low track students receive a challenging curriculum that emphasizes academic progress.

Untracked schools must alleviate the fears of parents, especially the parents of high achieving pupils, that de-tracking is more concerned with pursuing a dubious social agenda than substantive academic goals.

American education now includes both tracked and untracked schools. Several decades of research and debate have yet to prove that one is better than the other. The next generation of tracking policy should concentrate on improving the quality of education in both settings.

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