

5: GROUPING STUDENTS FOR INSTRUCTION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Ability grouping has been found to have few benefits and many risks. When homogeneous and heterogeneous groups of students are taught identical curricula, there appear to be few advantages to homogeneous grouping in terms of academic achievement. More able students make greater academic progress when separated from their fellow students and given an accelerated course of study. Less able students who are segregated from their more able peers are at risk of being taught an inferior curriculum and consigned to low tracks for their entire academic career. Teachers assigned to higher tracks and parents of bright students prefer ability grouping. Teachers in lower tracks are less enthusiastic and need support in the form of materials and instructional techniques to avoid the disadvantages of tracking.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Mixed or heterogeneous ability or achievement groups offer several advantages:
 - 1) less able pupils are at reduced risk of being stigmatized and exposed to a “dumbed-down” curriculum;
 - 2) teachers’ expectations for all pupils are maintained at higher levels;
 - 3) opportunities for more able students to assist less able peers in learning can be realized.
- Teachers asked to teach in a “de-tracked” system will require training, materials and support that are largely lacking in today’s schools.
- Administrators seeking to “detrack” existing programs will require help in navigating the difficult political course that lies ahead of them.

5: GROUPING STUDENTS FOR INSTRUCTION

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The sorting of students into homogeneous ability and achievement groups is nearly as old as universal compulsory education in the United States. The grouping of students by ability or achievement forms a continuum that extends from “reading groups” (the redbirds, bluebirds, and canaries) at one end to tracking and even segregation of students between school districts at the other. While the one extreme may be a matter strictly of professional pedagogical judgment, the other extreme may represent the impact of broad social forces outside the control of any one educator or group of professionals. This review will touch on each point across this continuum.

The seemingly simple notion of grouping pupils by their ability for instruction proves, upon closer examination, to be very complex with many variations. Within-class grouping, between-class grouping, the Joplin plan, XYZ grouping, gifted classes, academic tracks, charter schools – the inclination to sort students comes in many forms and has a long history. Otto found evidence of homogeneous achievement grouping of pupils as far back as the nineteenth century in America’s schools.¹ The Santa Barbara Concentric Plan of the early 1900s divided classes into A, B and C groups who received three levels of curriculum based on their past performance.

The pedagogical justification for homogeneous grouping centers on the role of the teacher: with students grouped by ability or achievement, the teacher is able to focus more instruction at the level of all the students in the group; thus, time is not wasted as bright students wait for elementary explanations to be given to their slower classmates,

and slow students are not troubled with instruction that is over their heads. Bright students are thought to need a faster pace and enriched material; low-ability students are thought to require remediation, repetition, and more reviews. Slower students, it is felt, will be better off shielded from competition with their brighter classmates; more able students will not become complacent by comparing themselves with slow students, and they will be spurred to higher levels of achievement by competing with their own kind. These images, not unfamiliar to teachers and parents alike, are rife with assumptions about the nature of human intelligence, the conditions of learning, the development of students' self-perceptions, and the behavior of teachers, only a few of which are tested in the research literature.

Ability grouping enjoyed wide professional and public acceptance beginning in the heyday of the “scientific” movement in education (from Edward L. Thorndike, to Lewis M. Terman, to the post-WW II era) and extending to the post-Sputnik era of emphasis on enriching curriculum for the gifted.² Homogeneous grouping in the form of tracking received severe criticism in the last quarter of the 20th century. James Rosenbaum's *Making Inequality*³ and Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis's *Schooling in Capitalist America*⁴ saw ability grouping as not just perpetuating but creating disadvantages for poor and minority students. Jeannie Oakes's *Keeping Track*⁵ prompted vigorous debate regarding the effects of homogeneous grouping. Tracking's detractors leveled charges of stigmatizing students, and consigning them to inferior and “dumbed-down” instruction. Homogeneous grouping was not completely without its supporters. Thomas Loveless concluded: “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.”⁶

STUDENT GROUPING RESEARCH

Researchers approaching this policy question from different points on the disciplinary compass have reached different conclusions about the value of homogeneous grouping. The issue of homogeneous grouping not only separates researchers and scholars, it separates social classes and ethnic groups as well. Ability grouping is nearly universally condemned by scholars from minority ethnic groups (e.g., Braddock⁷, Darling-Hammond⁸, Esposito⁹). Why these various groups have arrived at conflicting conclusions and what educators should make of their conflicting recommendations is the central question to be resolved in this review.

THE PREVALENCE OF HOMOGENEOUS GROUPING

How common is it for teachers and schools to separate students into groups of similar ability or achievement for purposes of instruction?

In part, estimates of the incidence of homogeneous grouping depend on how one asks the question. Public sentiment and professional judgment have turned against strict ability (IQ) grouping of the XYZ-type that first made an appearance in the 1920s. Beginning in 1919, the Detroit public schools administered intelligence tests, divided the distribution of students into strictly ordered ability groups – X, Y and Z – and taught the same curriculum to all three groups. This Huxleyesque scheme, so reminiscent of the Alphas and Betas in *Brave New World*, would be found unconstitutional in the present day. (Indeed, in *Hobson v. Hansen*, the tracking of students into ability groups in the Washington, D.C. schools was ruled to be a violation of Fourteenth Amendment rights.¹⁰)

Student Grouping

Ask educators today if they track pupils into “ability groups,” and they will probably say “No.” Ask them if they group students homogeneously by achievement to facilitate instruction, and their answer is likely to be “Yes.” While grouping is currently based on past performance rather than measured academic aptitude, the results are probably not much different, given the reasonably high correlation between achievement and aptitude.¹¹

Hoffer¹² reported data from the Longitudinal Study of American Youth that addressed the incidence of tracking in mathematics and science in more than 50 middle schools of the late 1980s. About 40% of the schools tracked students for science teaching in Grade 7; this figure rose to 50% in Grade 8. For mathematics instruction, 80% tracked in Grade 7 and more than 90% tracked in Grade 8. These data are supported by Epstein and MacIver’s¹³ survey, also performed in the late 1980s. Survey respondents were asked “For which academic subjects are students assigned to homogeneous classes on the basis of similar abilities or achievement levels?” Homogeneous grouping was practiced in two-thirds of the middle schools in some or all subjects at Grade 5 and in three-quarters of the schools at Grade 8 (See Table 5-1). Surveys of homogeneous grouping in elementary grades would show even higher incidences, where the proverbial redbirds, bluebirds, and canaries are almost ubiquitous.

TABLE 5-1
MIDDLE SCHOOLS CLASSIFIED BY TRACKING
IN SOME OR ALL SUBJECTS: 1988
With Percents by Columns
(After Epstein & MacIver, 1990)

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

These surveys may underestimate the incidence of homogeneous grouping in the nation’s public schools. Even the most inexperienced administrator knows that this issue divides teachers, parents, and other stakeholders in our schools. Complete candor on questionnaires received in the mail or in reply to questions posed by some ephemeral visitor to one’s school is not only unlikely, it could even be disruptive. Visitors to schools who enter them on different terms and who press for deeper answers might place the incidence of homogeneous grouping at levels even higher than these surveys. In an interview on his book *Savage Inequalities*, Jonathan Kozol remarked: “Virtually every school system I visit, with a few exceptions, is entirely tracked, although they don’t use that word anymore.”¹⁴ Whichever figure one might accept – two-thirds, three-quarters, or 100% – the conclusion seems inescapable that homogeneous grouping of students by ability or achievement is virtually endemic in American education.

Open enrollment plans in which students choose from among a set of courses also produces stratification of schools by ability groups. Sam Lucas has documented this

phenomenon in his book *Tracking Inequality: Stratification and Mobility in American High Schools*.¹⁵ Welner has observed the same pattern of sorting entering the school system in the form of choice programs:

...tracking under a choice regime resembles tracking under the more rigid tracking regimes of the past.¹⁶

For many district students, choice was more apparent than real. Scheduling conflicts constrained some students' choices in ways that perpetuated tracking (e.g., taking a lower-level math class prevented scheduling of a higher-level English class). For other students, ... the course selection process amounted to little more than accepting the schools' recommendations.¹⁷

Who Wants to Group Students: Teachers or Parents?

A survey published by the National Education Association in 1968 indicated that at least 75% of teachers preferred to teach homogeneously grouped classes.¹⁸ Teachers' affinity for ability grouping disappears among teachers who are assigned the lower-tracked classes.¹⁹ Contemporary surveys, though lacking, would likely duplicate this finding. It is not difficult to understand why teachers' jobs are made easier by teaching students in groups of similar achievement levels. However, it is not clear whether homogeneous grouping is intrinsically more effective or whether it is preferred because of an absence of curriculum materials and instructional techniques designed for heterogeneous groups.

Teachers' preferences for homogeneous grouping must surely be matched or even exceeded by parents' preferences for the same, at least the preferences of educated and wealthier parents to have their children placed in the highest groups. Parents' interventions into tracking decisions are common. Highly educated parents have been found more likely to push for high track placements than other parents.²⁰ Oakes and

Wells studied 10 middle schools and high schools in their research on "detracking"

secondary education and found that middle-class suburban values and norms are strong reinforcers of tracking.²¹

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ABILITY GROUPING

The topic of grouping students for instruction has been studied by researchers from quite different perspectives. On the one hand, educational psychologists have focused on academic achievement narrowly construed as performance on paper-and-pencil tests and self-esteem scales. Sociologists have taken a broader view that encompasses students' academic careers, and the opportunities and services offered students in different groups and tracks. Indeed, on this particular topic, it is fair to say that two different disciplines – psychology, and particularly educational psychology on the one hand, and sociology on the other – have focused on different aspects of this phenomenon and have arrived at different conclusions.

Educational Psychologists' View

Research on ability grouping by educational psychologists has a very long history, dating from the very beginnings of educational research itself. As early as 1916, Whipple²² studied students in the Urbana, Illinois, school system who had been grouped into homogeneous gifted classes. A handful of major studies – which themselves review and integrate the findings of dozens of primary studies extending over several decades – now forms the empirical basis of most persons' opinions about the effects of ability grouping on achievement: the Kulik and Kulik²³ and the Slavin²⁴ meta-analyses for elementary and secondary school ability grouping.

Since the meta-analyses²⁵ play a key role in forming an evaluation of the efficacy of homogeneous grouping, a brief explanation of this technique is in order. Meta-analysis

is a statistical technique used to combine and integrate the findings – themselves expressed statistically – of many individual empirical studies. In its simplest form, as an example, a meta-analysis might collect a hundred studies of the correlation of achievement and ability and report that the correlation coefficients ranged from 0.25 to 0.85 with an average correlation of 0.62. When the primary research studies being “meta-analyzed” involve comparing two groups – for example, students taught in homogeneous (condition A) v. heterogeneous (condition B) groups – it is common to express the findings of each primary study in a form known as an *effect size*. An effect size that describes the difference between two groups is defined as a mean difference (between conditions A and B) in units of the within-condition standard deviation:

$$ES = \frac{\text{Mean(A)} - \text{Mean(B)}}{\sigma}$$

The value of *ES* reveals the degree of superiority of condition A over condition B (or, B over A in the event that *ES* has a negative value). Under the assumption of normally distributed scores, an average *ES* of +1.0 indicates that the average student in condition A scores above 84% of the students in condition B. The concept of the effect size applied to standardized achievement test data enjoys a fortuitous coincidence. It is an empirical fact that the standard deviation of most achievement tests is 1.0 years in *grade equivalent units*. Consequently, an effect size of 1.0 implies that the average superiority of condition A over condition B is one year in grade equivalent units. Likewise, an effect size of 0.50 implies that students in A achieve, on average, 5 months in grade equivalent units above students in condition B.

The Kuliks' Meta-analyses.

Kulik and Kulik²⁶ integrated the findings of 52 experimental and quasi-experimental studies of the effect of ability grouping on achievement of secondary school students. The results of their analysis showed that the benefits in terms of academic achievement of ability grouping were virtually absent in all cases, with the exception of the comparisons of high-ability students in gifted classes vs. their counterparts in mixed-ability classes. When the effects for different subjects (math, science, reading, social studies), standardized vs. locally relevant tests, and objective vs. non-objective tests were examined, no consistent benefits were seen for ability grouping. When Kulik and Kulik examined the effects of ability grouping at the elementary school level, they found small but positive effects in reading and mathematics for both within-class and between-class ability grouping. Effect sizes were approximately 0.30 for high-ability students and declined to less than 0.20 for low-ability students. There emerges in the Kuliks' meta-analyses the first hint that the benefits of ability grouping may be due to the fact that high-ability students receive an enriched curriculum in homogeneous classes (as described, for example, by Oakes²⁷). This conclusion was given further substantiation in Kulik's meta-analysis of enrichment and accelerated programs for gifted and talented students that, when compared to gifted students in heterogeneous classes, yielded effects sizes of 0.40 for enrichment classes and 0.90 for accelerated classes. The Kuliks' meta-analyses were the first to challenge reviews like that of Good and Marshall²⁸ that recommended against all forms of ability grouping.

The Slavin Meta-analyses.

The Kulik and Kulik meta-analyses contrast somewhat with the meta-analyses

(called “best evidence syntheses”) published by Robert Slavin²⁹ in 1986 and 1990.

Slavin, who relied on a good deal more selectivity in forming the database of studies on ability grouping before attempting to integrate their findings, drew conclusions from the body of work that questioned the efficacy of homogeneous grouping for instruction at the secondary school level:

“Comprehensive between-class ability grouping plans have little or no effect on the achievement of secondary students, at least as measured by standardized tests. This conclusion is most strongly supported in Grades 7-9, but the more limited evidence that does exist from Grades 10-12 also fails to support any effect of ability grouping.”³⁰

At the elementary school level, Slavin³¹ concluded that the research supported modest but reliable benefits of within-class ability grouping for mathematics at the intermediate grades and benefits for reading achievement of the Joplin plan for all elementary grades. (In the Joplin plan, students are grouped *across grades* into intact classes for reading instruction, in which reading is taught in the same manner to the whole class, or at most two groups within the class; students then return to their principal grade assignment for all other instruction.) The seeming discrepancy between Slavin’s and Kulik and Kulik’s conclusions (Slavin being considerably more pessimistic about homogeneous grouping at the secondary school level than the Kuliks) is resolved when the criteria for inclusion of studies in the meta-analyses are examined. Whereas Kulik and Kulik threw a fairly broad net over the body of literature traditionally identified as ability grouping research, Slavin excluded studies that did not attempt to standardize curriculum among the various homogeneously formed groups that were compared. Slavin’s interest was in isolating the unique effect of having students learn in homogeneous groups, not in evaluating how curriculum may become differentiated (enriched in high ability groups,

“dumbed down” in low ability groups) among homogeneous groups. Indeed, Slavin issued a warning that is seldom acknowledged in brief or journalistic accounts of this research:

...there is an important limitation to this conclusion [of no beneficial effect of ability grouping]. In most of the studies that compared tracked to untracked grouping plans..., tracked students took different levels of the **same courses** (e.g., high, average, or low sections of Algebra 1). Yet much of the practical impact of tracking, particularly at the senior high school level, is on determining the nature and number of courses taken in a given area. The experimental studies do **not** compare students in Algebra 1 to those in Math 9.... The conclusions drawn ... are limited, therefore, to the effects of between-class grouping *within the same courses*, and should not be read as indicating a lack of differential effects of tracking as it affects course selection and course requirements.”³²
 [Added emphasis shown in boldface.]

The findings of the Kulik & Kulik and the Slavin meta-analyses are summarized in Table 5-2.

TABLE 5-2
AVERAGE EFFECT SIZES FROM THE
KULIK & KULIK AND SLAVIN META-ANALYSES
OF ABILITY GROUPING STUDIES

| Ability Grouping Type | Grade Level | Kulik & Kulik | Slavin |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|---------------|
| Within-Class | K-6 | +.20 | +.30 |
| Joplin Plan | K-6 | +.30 | +.45 |
| XYZ Ability Grouping | 7-12 | .00 | .00 |
| Enriched for Gifted | K-12 | +.40 | |
| Accelerated for Gifted | K-12 | +.90 | |

What becomes clear from examination of the above results is that, whatever benefits may accrue from the grouping of students into homogeneous ability groups for instruction, these benefits pale beside the benefits that accrue to gifted students when they are separated from their classmates and given enriched and accelerated curricula.

Proponents of ability grouping have sometimes made extraordinary reaches to supply their position with empirical warrants. Allan reached toward the research on “peer modeling” from educational psychology:

Further, the idea that lower ability students will look up to gifted students as role models is highly questionable. Children typically model their behavior after the behavior of other children of similar ability who are coping well with school. Children of low and average ability do not model themselves on fast learners.³³ It appears that “watching someone of similar ability succeed at a task raises the observer’s feelings of efficiency and motivates them to try the task.”³⁴ Students gain most from watching someone of similar ability “cope” (that is, gradually improve their performance after some effort), rather than watching someone who has attained “mastery” (that is, can demonstrate perfect performance from the outset).³⁵

These are extraordinary claims, if true, because they seem to oversimplify the complex dynamics of children’s lives in real classrooms. Indeed, the most generous thing that may be said for the research basis of this claim is that it is oversimplified and was never intended as justification for such positions. Schunk’s review of “peer models and children’s behavioral change” focuses entirely on short-term (a few minutes or hours), staged incidences in laboratories where children observe “models” performing artificial tasks, for the most part. In fact, Schunk excluded from his review studies of “natural peer interactions, [and] . . . tutoring or peer teaching.”³⁶ Moreover, this literature lacks any definition of what a “peer” is. At one point, Schunk concluded that, of four experiments involving observational learning of cognitive skills or novel responses, “Each of these studies supports the idea that model competence enhances observational learning.”³⁷

Schunk continues:

Social cognitive theory [predicts both that] Children should be more likely to pattern their behaviors after models who perform successfully than to emulate less-successful models, [and that] models who are *dissimilar* in competence to observers exert more powerful effects on children's behavior. ... Similarity in competence may be more important in contexts where children cannot readily discern the functional value of behavior; for example, when they lack task familiarity, when there is no objective standard of performance, or when modeled actions are followed by neutral consequences.³⁸

In other words, similar competence may be important – this theory seems to say – in those circumstances where children have no basis for inferring what the competence of the “model” is. If the reader thinks that this entire line of research bears scarcely a tenuous relationship to classroom practice and education policy, he or she is joined in those doubts by Schunk himself, who wrote: “Given the present lack of classroom-based research, drawing implications for educational practices is a speculative venture.”³⁹ No research appeared to correct this “lack” between Schunk’s review in 1987 and Allan’s use of it in 1991.

Sociologists’ View

Not surprisingly, psychologists acted like psychologists when they studied the effects of ability grouping: they contrived experiments, wrote paper-and-pencil tests, and sought objective evidence of superior test performance. When sociologists turned their attention to the tracking of students into ability groups, they acted like sociologists: spending time in schools observing; interviewing teachers, parents, and students; asking questions about opportunities, preconceptions; and wondering about what this form of schooling had to do with the larger society of which it was one small part.

Gamoran⁴⁰ found that students in low tracks or ability groups were less likely to attend college than students in higher tracks. That lower tracks receive a poorer quality

curriculum, less experienced teachers, and teachers with lower expectations for their students' performance has been observed by several researchers, including Gamoran,⁴¹ Oakes,⁴² Persell,⁴³ Rosenbaum.⁴⁴

Jeannie Oakes has been a consistent critic of homogeneous grouping of students at all levels of the educational system. Her research,⁴⁵ dating from the late 1970s, has drawn on the evidence accumulated in literally thousands of person-hours of observation of teachers and students in tracked classes and schools. She has presented her findings forthrightly and forcefully:

Tracking does *not* equalize educational opportunity for diverse groups of students. It does *not* increase the efficiency of schools by maximizing learning opportunities for everyone. . . . Tracking does *not* meet individual needs. Moreover, tracking does *not* increase student achievement.

What tracking does, in fact, appears to be quite the opposite. Tracking seems to retard the academic progress of many students – those in average and low groups. Tracking seems to foster low self-esteem among these same students and promote school misbehavior and dropping out. Tracking also appears to lower the aspirations of students who are not in the top groups. And perhaps most important, in view of all of the above, is that tracking separates students along socioeconomic lines, separating rich from poor, whites from nonwhites. The end result is that poor and minority children are found far more often than others in the bottom tracks.⁴⁶

Even proponents of tracking into ability groups have acknowledged that research “has verified again and again . . . that many low-track classes are deadening, non-educational environments.”⁴⁷ What is more, assignment to a low track is seldom followed by later reassignment to middle or high tracks. The professed intention of assignment to lower tracks being a transitional remedial period for the purpose of bringing students back up to speed is seldom realized.⁴⁸

In summarizing research on tracking from the sociological perspective, Welner and Mickelson wrote:

In a nutshell, this substantial body of research demonstrates that low-track classes are consistently characterized by lowered expectations, reduced resources, rote learning, less-skilled teachers, amplified behavioral problems, and an emphasis on control rather than learning... The extant empirical research has also demonstrated that low-track classes are rarely remedial; that is, students placed in a lower track tend not to move later to higher tracks and, in fact, suffer from decreased ambitions and achievement.... Track placements, while increasingly subject to parental and student choice, remain highly rigid and highly correlated to race and class-over and above measured academic achievement....⁴⁹

Although he does not present himself as a sociologist, Jonathan Kozol has earned a reputation over nearly forty years as a perceptive and credible observer of America's schools, particularly the schools that suffer the multiple insults of severe poverty. Kozol's 1991 book, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*, detailed his observations of the extreme inequities experienced by the poor and particularly the ethnic minority poor in U.S. schools. Tracking played a prominent role in most of the schools he visited. In an interview for the magazine *Educational Leadership*, Kozol was asked the following question:

Interviewer: Let's talk a little bit about curriculum innovations—for instance, the idea of reaching at-risk kids in ways that are usually reserved for the gifted. Teaching algebra to remedial students, for instance. Dissolving the tracking system. What are your opinions about these solutions to problems of inequity?

Kozol: Tracking! When I was a teacher, tracking had been thoroughly discredited. But during the past 12 years, tracking has come back with a vengeance. ... We have these cosmetic phrases like “homogeneous grouping.” It's tracking, by whatever name, and I regret that very much. It's not just that tracking damages the children who are doing poorly, but it also damages the children who are doing very well, because, by separating the most successful students—who are often also affluent, white children—we deny them the opportunity to learn something about decency and unselfishness. We deny them the opportunity to learn the virtues of helping other kids. All the wonderful possibilities of peer teaching are swept away when we track our schools as severely as we are doing today.⁵⁰

Why Such Different Views?

Two groups of scholars – educational psychologists on the one hand and educational sociologists on the other – come to quite different conclusions on the value of Student Grouping

homogeneous grouping of students for instruction. Why? The answer lies in what they look for and how they look for it. Psychologists have tended to focus on short-run comparisons of different ability groups exposed to the same curriculum; they have evaluated the effects of grouping with paper-and-pencil tests of achievement. For example, only nine of the 52 studies in the Kuliks' meta-analysis of secondary school ability grouping involved any *formal* adaptation of the curriculum to the ability level of the students.

Sociologists have taken a broader view of the various effects that ensue from the separation of students into homogeneous groups: the curriculum they receive, the type of instruction they are given, the social climate that is created and how it might shape their long-range plans, and the like. In large part, then, these two groups have been observing different phenomena, and operating with different disciplinary assumptions that have led them to draw conclusions that, if they don't contradict each other, at least place emphases on different outcomes. Psychologists' efforts to control independent variables have led them to focus on experiments that held curriculum constant and varied group composition: homogeneously formed groups in one school, heterogeneously formed groups in another. Sociologists, by contrast, have employed methods more akin to naturalistic observation, finding tracked schools and observing all of the consequences that ensue, including markedly differentiated curricula between tracks. These different perspectives account, perhaps, for the relatively benign view of tracking taken by educational psychologists.

CONCLUSION

One's position on the ability grouping question will probably turn on the value

one attaches to academic achievement of traditional types versus the broader goals of education. Those who construe the purpose of schooling as primarily preparing students – particularly the more academically able students – for higher education or the workforce, and who feel they see clearly the demands of those future roles, are likely to accept homogeneous grouping as an appropriate instructional strategy. On the other hand, those who see education as sorting children and reproducing social and economic class inequalities and protecting the privileges of already privileged social and ethnic groups are likely to regard homogeneous grouping as a principal means of achieving this goal. Loveless,⁵¹ in his much cited book *The Tracking Wars*, sketches a view of education that virtually presupposes the superiority of ability grouping: Schools are “places for students to learn content that is designated, authoritatively, by someone else”⁵² (p. 13). This authoritative designation involves “deciding what students should know (content), deciding what they are capable of learning (ability), and finally, reconciling the content with students’ ability to learn it.”⁵³ The educator’s responsibility is that of “matching students with curriculum” and having “a legitimate party [decide what] students should learn.”⁵⁴ This authoritarian, content-centered view of schooling has as many detractors and as it has supporters.

Welner summarized the situation with respect to tracking in language stripped of vagueness and euphemisms:

Ultimately, tracking is philosophically premised on the belief that some children are so academically different from other children that these two (or more) groups should not be in the same classroom. Accordingly, the academically inferior children are placed in separate classrooms where, in theory, they catch up (remediate) but where, in practice, they usually fall further behind. Tracking, then, is about the rationing of opportunities. From the perspective of the low-track student, it’s about deciding that this student should not be exposed to curriculum and instruction that would prepare him or her for subsequent serious learning.

From the perspective of the high-track student, it's about enhancing the schooling environment for some students by shielding (segregating) them from other students.⁵⁵

The teacher who worries about the potential injustice to poor and minority students of tracking them into homogeneous groups will find little support for dealing with the special challenges that heterogeneous grouping presents. Commercially available curriculum materials are unlikely to aim at the same goals while differentiating the approach for students of differing levels of ability. Cross-ability tutoring, which has the potential to significantly raise the achievement of the tutors as well as those students being tutored,⁵⁶ is seldom provided for in today's schools and almost never included among the techniques imparted during pre-service teacher training. Often, the most vocal and active parents in a school will request ability grouping, when their children stand a good chance of being assigned to the fast track. It is little wonder that teachers prefer homogeneous groups for instruction, unless they are confined to teaching the lowest tracks. However, the challenge that must be faced whenever students are separated into homogeneous achievement groups is to avoid the "dumbing down" of the curriculum, to make the content and activities of the class as engaging and interesting as the curriculum of the highest tracks, whether they are called "gifted," "accelerated," or "advanced." One of the few efforts to reverse the ill-effects of tracking at-risk students into low-achieving homogeneous groups is Henry Levin's⁵⁷ accelerated schools movement, in which curriculum and teaching methods thought to be appropriate only for high track students are adapted for the education of all students. Tomlinson has recently offered advice on how instruction can be differentiated in mixed-ability classrooms without suffering the many ills that can result from segregating students into homogeneous ability groups.⁵⁸

Administrators wishing to “detrack” traditionally tracked schools will face a considerable challenge. Welner and Oakes have offered plans for navigating the choppy political waters that must be crossed when schools that have evolved to primarily serve the interests of the brightest students are transformed into schools that serve all students’ needs.⁵⁹

Ability grouping, achievement grouping, within-class, between-class, Joplin plan, gifted programs, tracking, advanced placement – all of these devices may spring from the same basic motivation. Since the empirical research on academic progress shows nothing much more than small benefits to bright students of any of these forms of grouping per se, and large benefits from enriching and accelerating the curriculum for select students, the prevalence of these forms themselves probably represents another expression of the wish of middle-class and upper-middle-class parents to secure some advantage or privilege for their children within the public school system. Is this bad? In a schooling system already markedly segregated on the basis of housing patterns and in which poor and academically deprived children already suffer not just from sub-standard schooling but from the indignity of racial and socio-economic segregation (as noted by Kozol⁶⁰ and by Orfield and Eaton⁶¹), the homogeneous grouping of students for instruction is one more advantage conferred on those who already enjoy many. Jonathan Kozol has called the tracking of poor and minority students into “special-needs” classes while white middle-class students are accelerated in classes for the gifted “one of the great, great scandals of American education.”⁶²

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Mixed or heterogeneous ability or achievement groups offer several

advantages:

- 1) less able pupils are at reduced risk of being stigmatized and exposed to a “dumbed-down” curriculum;
 - 2) teachers’ expectations for all pupils are maintained at higher levels;
 - 3) opportunities for more able students to assist less able peers in learning can be realized.
- Teachers asked to teach in a “de-tracked” system will require training, materials and support that are largely lacking in today’s schools.
 - Administrators seeking to “detrack” existing programs will require help in navigating the difficult political course that lies ahead of them.

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