The Pros and Cons of Tracking and Ability Grouping in Schools

Imagine you are a fourth grade student who still struggles with reading fluency. You are assigned to read aloud in a group consisting of some of the best readers in the class, and a few average readers. How would you feel in this situation? What if you were an academically gifted seventh grade student who was placed in a class with mostly inclusion students and those having IEPs? Most of the students in the class learn at a slower pace which is how the teacher gauges her instruction. Would you enjoy having to tutor the other students on content you’ve already mastered at the expense of the opportunity to enhance your own knowledge? How comfortable would you be as a master’s student with no teaching experience in a class full of mostly doctoral students with an average of at least 10 years of teaching experience? Would you be excited by the thought of all you could learn from them, or would you be intimidated, lost, and overwhelmed because frankly you don’t have a clue what they’re talking about most of the time?

These are some common situations associated with tracking (the creation of homogeneous groups of students school-wide; i.e. AP and remedial classes, gifted and vocational programs, etc.) and ability grouping (the creation of homogeneous groups of students within the classroom; i.e. reading groups, study groups, etc.). The use of these two methods of grouping in US schools has been hotly debated for many decades.

Tracking and ability grouping are two educational practices that began in the mid-19th century, reached their peak in the United States in the 1920's, and are currently still being implemented in about three-quarters of the school districts in the United States (Ansalone & Biafora, 2004, Chiu et al., 2008). Much research has been conducted on the advantages and disadvantages of utilizing these practices in a variety of school and classroom settings. Most of the studies I examined looked at how various grouping strategies affect students with high, low,
and average academic ability. Regardless of whether the research favored heterogeneous, homogeneous, or a mixture of both types of groups, one overarching theme I discovered throughout the literature indicated that tracking and ability grouping can potentially be beneficial for intellectual learning outcomes. However, heterogeneous classes and groups may tend to foster the social and psychological aspects of learning. Nonetheless, research results were widely varied and inconclusive, although it appears that the idea of minimizing the use of homogeneous grouping is fast becoming the more favored opinion (Good & Brophy, 2008).

Much of the research on tracking and ability grouping is supportive, yet there is plenty that is not. For example, Chiu et al. (2008) cite several experts who feel that homogeneous grouping of students is undesirable because (1) students in lower tracks are provided an inadequate curriculum, (2) negative track labels can influence students’ self-esteem, (3) low-track students are held to lower expectations, and (4) they often have teachers with less experience. In regards to social comparisons and self-esteem, many believe that the problems arise when low track students compare themselves with high-track students. As Ansalone & Biafora (2004) explain, “one perspective argues that knowledge of being excluded from ‘advanced’ tracks contributes to a negative self-concept, while an alternative view suggests that tracking allows students of lower tracks to feel more at ease with themselves among peers of similar academic ability. The empirical evidence on self-concept and the long-term effects of tracking remains mixed.” When Chiu et al. (2008) examined the Influences of Math Tracking on Seventh-Grade Students’ Self-Beliefs and Social Comparisons, the results showed that nearly 12% of students compared themselves with students outside of their math track, while almost 89% made comparisons within their own track. Because the vast majority of students compared within track rather than across-track, that “should alleviate researchers’ concerns that low-track
students have lower self-esteem and self-concepts because they are comparing themselves with high-track students. There may be other factors that are stronger, such as grades, teacher attitudes and interactions with students, and the positive and negative labels assigned to different tracks” (Chiu et al., 2008).

Further highlighting the inconclusiveness of the research is a study conducted by Ansalone & Biafora (2004) which examined *Elementary Schoolteachers' Perceptions and Attitudes to the Educational Structure of Tracking*. First, they noted several reasons for opposition to homogeneous grouping including socioeconomic factors such as (1) low track classes become the dumping ground for poor and disruptive children, (2) it is undemocratic and perpetuates the separation of youth along ethnic, racial, and socio-economic lines, and (3) tracking limits a student's opportunity to learn by restricting the quantity and quality of course material provided in lower tracks. In other words, “tracking allocates the most valuable school resources including a high currency curriculum, effective instruction, and positive teacher expectations, to students who already possess the greatest social, academic and economic advantages” (Ansalone & Biafora, 2004). On the other hand, they explain that “proponents of tracking argue that (1) it provides the means to more individualized instruction whereby all students are allowed to advance at their own pace with students of similar ability, (2) parents support tracking because it protects children of higher ability from the possibility of being held back by those of lower ability, and (3) by not being invidiously compared with students of higher ability, all students develop a more positive outlook regarding their educational ability” (Ansalone & Biafora, 2004).

Citing results from their own study, Ansalone & Biafora (2004) found that “less than one-half the tracked respondents (46.8%) said the [tracking] experience was a positive one.”
And, when asked if tracking had any consequences on future education, employment, or other opportunities, “more than one-half (50.7%) reported that the experience was less than positive.” However, when looking at those results, I did not feel they were significant enough to provide a sound argument either for or against tracking. It appears as though half of the students favored the experience while the other half did not. Furthermore, Ansalone & Biafora (2004) admit that “despite mixed reviews in their personal tracking histories and experiences and despite the volume of research documenting negative outcomes associated with tracking, particularly among those in lower tracks, [most of] the teachers in our study (70%) were generally supportive of separating grade school students into educational learning tracks.” When the teachers were asked if they felt tracking should be continued in their schools, nearly 41% thought that it should continue with modifications, and only 12.5% thought it should be discontinued altogether. “Teachers realize the educational benefits of a more challenging curriculum and classroom to slower learners, but they also realize they may be holding up brighter students in the process” (Ansalone & Biafora, 2004).

Continuing with this same study, the authors report that 70% of teachers surveyed admitted to needing more time to cover basic work with the lower tracks, and 62% of the teachers were able to provide more course material to upper-track classes. Therefore, it seems that a large part of their reason for supporting homogeneous grouping is influenced by the fact that “tracking can reduce the range of instructional need and make the teachers' job more manageable” (Ansalone & Biafora, 2004). Additionally, Chiu et al. (2008) note that “advocates of tracking and ability grouping argue that reducing heterogeneity in the class instructional group allows teachers to increase the pace and level of instruction for high achievers and provide more review and corrective feedback for low achievers, thereby optimizing achievement gains for
most students.” Furthermore, in regards to teacher expectations and student achievement, Chiu et al. (2008) found that “the assignment of grades according to track level may be a result of teacher perceptions, in which teachers expect their lower level students to perform at a lower level and thereby assign grades accordingly, although students in different tracks may obtain the same level of achievement.”

Yet another example of the mixed results obtained from studying tracking and ability grouping is provided by Poole (2008). She presents the following disadvantages to homogeneous ability grouping: (1) it can lead to a wider achievement gap between students in various groups, (2) lower-ability groups may receive instruction characterized by more skills-based and decoding activities and less critical thinking, (3) movement to higher-level groups can be difficult and/or rare, and (4) the negative effect on self-esteem can lead to a loss in motivation for learning. She also notes that, “ability groups are considered especially harmful for minority students, who are disproportionately represented in lower-level groups” which can perpetuate existing stereotypes and inequalities. However, the results of her study indicate that “mixed-ability reading groups do not always avoid the problems associated with their homogeneous counterparts.” Poole (2008) found that struggling readers in mixed-ability groups read less and were interrupted more often than their peers. She suggests that the question then becomes whether the mixed-ability group might result in the same kind of stigma for low-performing students that it is designed to avoid. Perhaps, as other scholars have noted, a child’s ranking within a group is of more importance than whether or not the group is homogenous or heterogeneous in terms of reading ability (Poole, 2008).

Some researchers have found that tracking has positive effects on higher level students and negative effects on lower level students; others have found just the opposite (Chiu et al.,
2008). Still others, such as Saleh, Lazender, & De Jong (2005), found that low-ability students have more success in heterogeneous groups, average-ability students succeed best in homogeneous groups, and “high-ability students show equally strong learning outcomes in homogeneous and heterogeneous groups.” They suggest that heterogeneous groups favor individual learning, while homogeneous groups favor collaboration. In other words, “some students may find it particularly rewarding to help others or to get to know fellow students better; other students may be more motivated to learn in familiar settings among friends” (Saleh, Lazender, & De Jong, 2005).

Despite the vastly differing viewpoints, there have been many suggestions for alternatives and modifications to tracking and ability grouping. For example, Saleh, Lazender, & De Jong (2005) state that “as intact classrooms consist mainly of average achievers (especially when students’ ability is judged relative to their class mates), teachers prefer grouping practices that, ironically, tend to inhibit the majority of their students. [Instead,] teachers could for instance create heterogeneous groups of high and low-ability students and place the remaining average-ability students in homogeneous groups.” A similar suggestion, flexible grouping, is offered by Poole (2008) and entails grouping students for different purposes based on particular student learning needs as determined through continuous assessment with frequent changes in group membership.

Another alternative, as explained by Good & Brophy (2008) is the Joplin plan. According to this plan, students would be assigned to heterogeneous classes for most of the day, but regrouped for reading instruction strictly according to reading achievement level, not by grade level. Importantly, students must be freely reassigned when their performance warrants it. This method, according to Good & Brophy (2008), “simplifies management and increases the time
that students receive instruction from the teacher rather than work independently on assignments.” Results of using the Joplin plan are, once again, inconclusive. However, further suggestions from Good and Brophy (2008) include “postponing tracking by deferring it as late in the grade span as possible, limiting it to subjects in which skill differences are clear detriments to whole-class instruction, using multiple placement criteria to determine track placement, offering students incentives for taking challenging courses, minimizing separate offerings for gifted and special needs students, rotating teachers among track levels, and encouraging students to move up to higher tracks and providing them with extra help when needed.”

All of these suggestions would help the practices of tracking and ability grouping to adhere to the standards set forth in Title IV of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or origin in the assignment of students to schools, classes, and courses of study in programs that receive federal assistance (Civil Rights Act, 1964). Thus, according to Chiu et al. (2008), the basis for track assignments cannot be discriminatory, and students must be given the chance to move between tracks on the basis of their progress.” On this highly debatable topic, it is important to remember that there is no research indicating that either homogeneous or heterogeneous grouping is uniformly superior for promoting the achievement of all students. Also, as Ansalone & Biafora (2004) aptly state, “de-tracking alone will not solve the problems of American education.” Perhaps the focus should be less about the black or white issue of whether tracking is good or bad, and more about useful modifications and how to implement better tracking procedures in the future.
References


