

# THE PROS AND CONS OF TRACKING AND ABILITY GROUPING IN SCHOOLS

Jamie Klintworth August 10, 2009

# What the research says...

2004 study of elementary teacher's views on tracking:

- 47% felt tracking was positive experience
- 51% felt consequences of tracking on future educational and employment opportunities was “less than positive”
- 70% of teachers need more time to cover the same material in the low track class
- 62% of teachers are able to provide more material to the high track class

Ansalone, G., & Biafora, F. (2004). Elementary schoolteachers' perceptions and attitudes to the educational structure of tracking. *Education*, 125(2), 249-258.

# What the research says...

2004 study of elementary teacher's views on tracking:

- 70% of teachers supported tracking in elementary grades
- 41% of those thought tracking should continue, **but** with modifications
- 12% thought tracking should be eliminated 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, G., & Biafora, F. (2004). Elementary schoolteachers' perceptions and attitudes to the educational structure of tracking. *Education*, 125(2), 249-258.

# What the research says...

2005 study of the effects of within-class ability grouping:

- Low ability students- heterogeneous (mixed) groups
- Average- homogeneous groups
- High ability- either type of group
  
- **“As intact classrooms consist mainly of average achievers, teachers who don’t support ability grouping prefer grouping practices that, ironically, tend to inhibit the majority of their students.”**

Saleh, M., Lazonder, A. W., & De Jong, T. (2005). Effects of within-class ability grouping on social interaction, achievement, and motivation. *Instructional Science*, 33(2), 105-119.

# What the research says...

2008 study of struggling readers in mixed ability groups:

- Struggling readers in mixed groups encounter the same problems associated with their placement in homogeneous ability groups
- They read less and are interrupted more often than the other students
- **“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.”**

Poole, D. (2008). Interactional differentiation in the mixed-ability group: A situated view of two struggling readers. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 43(3), 228-250.

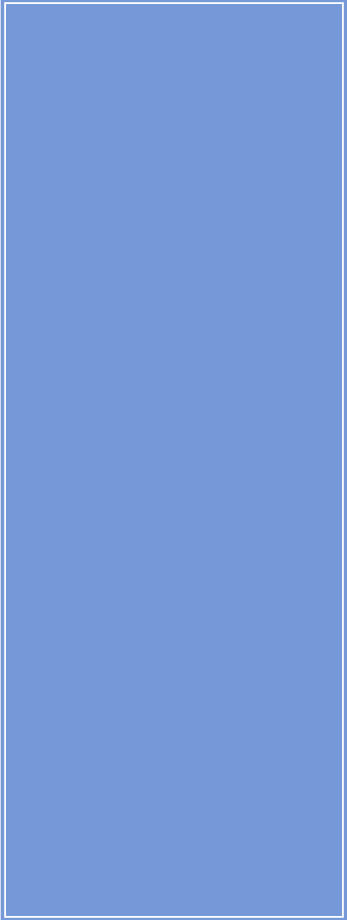
# What the research says...

2008 study of 7<sup>th</sup> grade math class:

- 89% compare within track
- 12% compare across
- **“Perhaps a child’s ranking within a group is of more importance than whether or not the group is homogenous or heterogeneous.”**

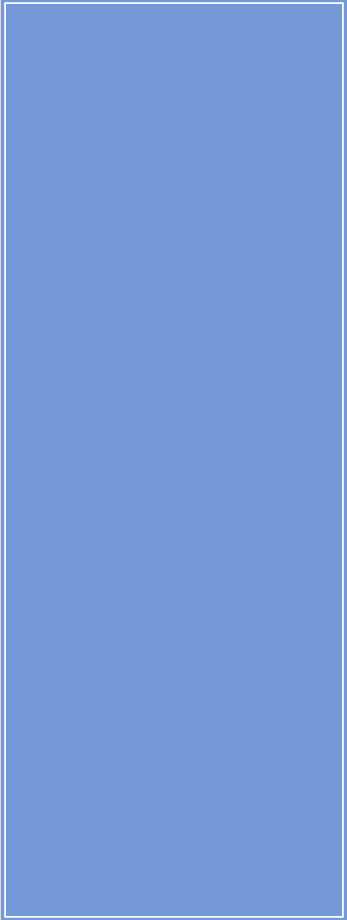
Chiu, D., Beru, Y., Watley, E., Wubu, S., Simson, E., Kessinger, R., et al. (2008). Influences of math tracking on seventh-grade students’ self-beliefs and social comparisons. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 102(2), 125-135.

# Suggestions for modifications:

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- flexible grouping- arranging students for different purposes based on their learning needs as determined through continuous assessment with frequent changes in group membership
  - Joplin Plan- students are assigned to mixed classes for most of the day, but are homogeneously grouped for reading instruction strictly according to reading level, not by grade level, and are freely reassigned when warranted

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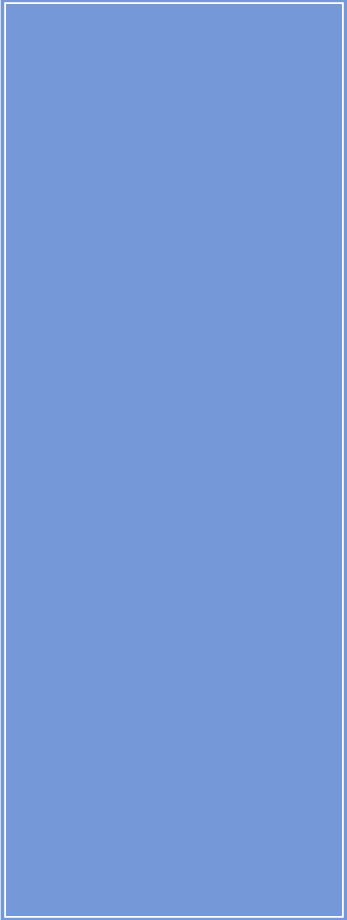
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- create mixed groups for high and low-ability students and place the remaining average-ability students in homogeneous groups
  - rotate teachers among track levels
  - limit it to disciplines in which skill differences are clear detriment to whole-class instruction



# Suggestions for modifications:

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- ☐ use multiple placement criteria
  - ☐ postpone tracking as late as possible
  - ☐ **offer incentives for taking challenging courses**
  - ☐ **minimize separate offerings for gifted and special needs students**

# What's the answer?

- ❑ **There is no research indicating that either homogeneous or heterogeneous grouping is uniformly superior for promoting the achievement of *all* students.**
- ❑ **De-tracking alone will not solve the problems of American education.**