

Tracking is Inherently Unequal

I. Introduction

Tracking is a process to sort students into small learning groups based on the student's ability.ⁱ The track determines the content of the courses that a student will take as well as the career path that some students will take. The original idea behind tracking was that certain students were much more likely to go into the learned professions while others were more likely to become electricians and carpenters. The students who would go into higher education would be put into more accelerated tracks or college preparatory tracks. The other students would be in the vocational tracks which would prepare them for those blue collar jobs that they were predicted to go into. The central belief was that only a certain few talented students were capable of achieving academic excellence. Most students, on the hand, would have to be in vocational courses.ⁱⁱ

A. Reasons for Tracking

Different students certainly are capable of achieving different things. Every student comes into every grade level with varying amounts of knowledge and ability. The logic is that we need to have a system where all the students are given an opportunity to succeed. What that means is that certain kids who are essentially not as smart go into less challenging courses so that they can succeed. It is believed that if these students go into advanced courses, they will not be able to pass because they are not as smart.ⁱⁱⁱ

The logic continues for those in advanced courses. If the "advanced" kids are forced to be in classrooms with everyone else, they will not be challenged. The average

kids would be asking too many questions and would hinder the progress of the advanced kids.^{iv} Teachers also find that it is difficult to teach to different abilities at the same time. It is impossible, some teachers say, to “lead students through the plot twists of *King Lear* while simultaneously instructing in phonics.”^v

B. Tracking versus Ability Grouping

There is a small difference between tracking and ability grouping that is worth mentioning for purposes of formulating a school policy. Tracking sets a path for students throughout their academic careers. So if they are in a vocational track, they will take these math courses, these reading courses, these science courses, etc. In ability grouping, the students have different paths for each subject and have a variety of classes that they can take at each level. For example, a lower level student may be able to choose between taking Algebra II or Geometry.^{vi}

II. Negatives

A. Effects on Different Races/Incomes

“Lower ability groups contain disproportionate numbers of low socio-economic status students, many of whom are black and Hispanic.”^{vii} The poor economic classes are riddled with racial minorities. There are many reasons why poor students do worse in school. To name a few, wealthy parents can afford to hire tutors. Poor families often contain only one parent who needs to have two jobs to support his or her family. When the parent is not home, there is no one to discipline their kids to do homework. If these poor kids have hungry stomachs, they are not going to be studying much. Many Hispanic parents brought their families from Mexico to try to get a better life. Sadly, they must start at the bottom because they come here with nothing. The least that society can do is

not penalize these kids and not make it impossible for them to succeed merely because they are starting out at a lower point.

In *Brown v. Board*, the Supreme Court held that separate schools are inherently unequal.^{viii} In line with that case, separate classrooms are also inherently unequal. Since black students disproportionately account for the students in lower ability courses and white students disproportionately account for the students in advanced courses, it appears that this policy is racist. Despite the fact that it is not illegal to have tracking, the results of its implementation are very similar to segregation in schools. By keeping minorities in lower classes, we are perpetuating the cycle. Tracking is supposed to be about ability, not about knowledge, prior experience, or money. We say that we are not a racist society. It would be racist to believe that whites have more “ability” than minorities do. Therefore, having a system that separates abilities with disproportionate effects on the races is inherently unequal and racist. The differences in the quality of education that cause this unequal treatment of the races will be addressed below.

C. Effects on Teachers

Tracking has horrific effects on teachers. It stigmatizes teachers to believe that the students aren’t capable learners and cannot be expected to master the same kinds of skills demanded in other classes. This causes teachers to prepare to teach less of the material and in less depth because they already believe that the students aren’t capable.^{ix}

I am a volleyball coach at a high school and I tell my kids that the worst thing that can happen for them is for me to not criticize them on anything because that means that I no longer care and have given up on them. While I have come close to that edge on several occasions, I can happily say that it has never happened to the full extent.

Any time you have a child in a classroom that is labeled as slow, the teacher will not put forth a full effort to teach that student because there will always be that thought in the teacher's mind that the reason that student is not succeeding is because they are "slow" and not because of inadequate teaching. Once the teacher stops paying attention to the student or stops putting forth a full effort to teach a student, the student herself is likely to give up on herself because her teacher does not believe in her. Students, teachers, parents, and society at large will all suffer as a result of teachers being stigmatized by students being tracked into lower tracks.

D. Effects on Students

Our educational system in America is problematic. We have by far the wealthiest big nation in the world and yet our mathematical scores are pathetic compared to the rest of world. Our drop-out rates among the poor and minorities are abysmal. The question is how to solve these problems. Tracking has been a very controversial issue. The most important question is of course what effect tracking has on students. Almost all of the effects on students are negative.

Teachers don't want to teach lower courses. Therefore, the lower courses are taught by the most inexperienced teachers.^x Experienced teachers choose which courses they get to teach. These experienced teachers almost always choose to teach the more advanced courses like calculus. Teachers want to teach the advanced courses for two main reasons.

There is certainly a level of prestige associated with teaching calculus as opposed to arithmetic. The second reason is that it is easier to teach courses like calculus because there are far more talented kids in those courses. A big part of teaching is being a baby-

sitter. A teacher not only has to teach the curriculum but also has to monitor the students' behavior. A teacher has to deal with many more behavioral issues in a class of under achievers as opposed to a class of over achievers. Therefore, the more experienced teachers choose to teach the advanced courses. Thus, the students in the lower classes who need more attention, who need more instruction, who need more guidance are forever stuck with the less-skilled new teachers that keep getting funneled into the lower classes.^{xi xii}

School districts vary in terms of when they begin to separate students by ability. Many begin in elementary schools and thus the cycle begins quite early. Once they are in the lower track, it is extremely difficult to get out. They are in lower classes which do not challenge them and continue to go at a slower pace. The more advanced students already start out higher and also go at a faster pace. Therefore, the gap in ability grows every day that these students are in different classrooms. At the next grade level, the kids are unlikely to progress to the higher track because they spent time in a class with less qualified, less experienced teachers who were stigmatized to believe that the students were not capable, and spent the year teaching at a slower rate and therefore covered less material.

One possible way to get out of the system is to get a tutor. However, as many of these lower level students come from low socio-economic levels, they likely cannot afford to get a tutor. Thus, the students will have a very difficult time in changing their track.^{xiii}

As Sarah Keiser described, tracking produces slower and slower rates of learning and lower and lower levels of motivation and smaller and smaller chances of receiving

better track assignments. Ability grouping is slightly better because it allows students to take a variety of classes at a certain level.^{xiv}

One of the most devastating effects of tracking is that it causes the students in the lower tracks to lose their motivation to learn. Only the kids themselves can do the homework. Only the kids themselves can be responsible for pushing themselves to try to achieve academic excellence. When these kids are told that they are in lower classes, they will lower their self-esteem. With lowered self-esteem, they will stop trying and give up entirely, and in the worst scenario, drop out of school. Tracking must be stopped because it causes students to lose motivation. Motivation is something that society as a whole cannot afford to let these kids lose.^{xv}

Kids become stigmatized against themselves and the learning institution as a whole. The students in the lower classes will not be challenged to same degree as the higher level students. They will feel that they are not expected to do the same work and will stop taking their education seriously.^{xvi}

You are what you eat and you are who you hang out with. Lower level students will only spend time during the day with low level students. Higher level students will only spend time with higher level students. The people you spend time with during the day are the same people that you are likely to become friends with and thereby spend time with outside of school. If smart kids are only hanging out with smart kids and less smart kids are only hanging out with less smart kids then that again continues to perpetuate the cycle. Less smart kids will be hanging out with kids who are also less motivated and will therefore not motivate each other. If, however, we had mixed classrooms, kids of varying abilities would become friends, and the smarter kids could

push their less smart friends to be more motivated and try harder in school and do better.^{xvii}

Since we know that lower level classes are filled with kids who come from under privileged backgrounds, we also know that wealthier students are more likely to be in advanced classes. However, the next question is what happens in the schools where all the students come from privileged backgrounds? The answer is that the cut-off for the advanced track is much higher in richer schools. Kids who grow up in upper middle class school districts will have a much more difficult time in trying to get into the advanced class tracks than their counterparts in mixed income school districts.^{xviii}

I grew up in Skokie, which at the time was a fairly stereotypical homogenous town of white upper middle class families. In eighth grade, we first heard of the strict divisions in math tracks in high school. Those that begin in lower tracks will likely not get an opportunity to take AP courses that give college credits. All through junior high, I was a pretty big slacker. When I asked my math teacher where she was going to recommend me, I was very disappointed when she told me that I was going to be placed in a regular course for my freshmen year. In 8th grade, I was in the advanced math course but wasn't doing particularly well. My last semester in 8th grade, she told me that if I managed to get an A in the class, then she would recommend me for the higher track. I still have the portfolio of all my work that semester because I got an A and I got into the higher track. While my personal example has a happy ending, it is certainly indicative of how much more difficult it is to get into higher tracks in schools filled with privileged kids..

I didn't want to be in the regular track because most of my friends went to the advanced track. The main reason is that I did not want to be labeled as normal when my friends were being labeled as advanced. I cannot imagine what it would be like to be labeled as slow or show up on the first day and find out that I'm in the class with the kids that everyone thinks are dumb. If students are labeled as slow, they will start to believe that they are slow. Their peers will think that they are dumb; their teachers will think that they are dumb. They will lose motivation and may give up on school entirely. There is no good age at which labeling is good, but when tracking and thereby labeling often begin in elementary school, that will certainly have many detrimental effects on students and society at large.^{xix}

Parents that come from privileged backgrounds likely have experience with tracking. They are likely to know when their kids are being tracked into lower programs. Parents will complain because they know the consequences of having their child in the lower track. However, poor parents whose children are more likely to be in the lower track classes to begin with are less likely to know these things and thus will not complain. This is yet another problem between the races and the classes that will continue to perpetuate the problem and continue the self-fulfilling prophecy.^{xx}

E. Effects on Society

The facts are as follows. Lower level classes are filled with minorities and poor people. Education is the key to making money in America or anywhere for that matter. Poor people are in classes that will not allow the students to go to college in the long run. This will cause these students to get low paying jobs. As a result their children will also

have low socio-economic status. This will also cause them to be more likely to be in the lower tracks in school, and thus the cycle continues.

One of the kids on my volleyball team at the wealthy suburban Libertyville High School is black. He sometimes wears his favorite t-shirt which reads: “Caution: Intelligent Black Man. I think the t-shirt is quite telling of the current situation. He lives in a rich neighborhood in a mansion. He is certainly does not have a low socio-economic status. However, for some reason the other kids look at the statement on his t-shirt as a sort of oxy-moron. Intelligent and black man do not usually go together.

It is clear that black children are more likely to be placed in lower classes which produce lower productivity students. This only serves to perpetuate the cycle and continues to allow everyone to think that intelligent and black man should not go together. I hope that one day, my player Malcolm buys a t-shirt that reads: “yep, just another intelligent black man.” Until that day, we cannot and should not have tracking in our schools because it only serves to perpetuate the belief in this country that intelligence and black people and intelligence and poor people simply do not go together.

III. Positives

The only group that really benefits from tracking is the advanced students who get to be challenged in advanced courses.^{xxi} They would not have the same opportunity to be challenged if they were held back by those students who were not as advanced. When I was in 7th grade, I was placed in an average math class. I was eventually moved up to the advanced class, but the two weeks I spent in regular math were very interesting to say the least. I was shocked to hear the questions that some of these kids were asking. I couldn't believe they didn't know some of these fundamental concepts that I found simple. I was

very happy when I got moved up because I couldn't bear the lack of a challenge.

However, I think the reason that they were so behind was that they were in lower math classes much earlier than 7th grade. They likely were always in less advanced classes that were taught by less experienced teachers and thus did not learn those concepts that I found to be easy.

IV. Alternatives

Tracking is producing stupid kids. This is happening not because of a lack of talent but rather because of a system that is willing to give up on certain individuals. As a result, you have people graduating from the same high schools with grossly different experiences. You have some who are graduating with college credits and others that have no chance of going to college. My personal belief is that we need to have mandated minimums of knowledge that are required to pass high school as well as each grade level. If that means that some will never graduate high school, so be it. Discussed below are some of the alternatives that have been considered by education scholars.

A. Cooperative learning

Cooperative learning involves mixed group classrooms with small group projects. The goal is to have students working together toward a common goal and sharing the accountability of failure or success. There are two recognized problems with this approach. The first problem is that the lesser students will feel inadequate because they cannot complete the more challenging tasks that only the smarter kids can complete. The second problem is that the smarter kids may just complete the project by doing most of the work by themselves because they would rather just finish the project rather than help the other kids to figure out how to do it.^{xxii}

B. Accelerated Schools

Accelerated schools involves classrooms where the students learn fast-paced problem solving that would normally be reserved for the advanced classes. Students would practice problem solving rather than memorization. This method once again runs into the same problems as the cooperative learning method because the talented students once again would likely dominate the projects.^{xxiii}

C. TAG

Tag would create three levels at each grade level: beginner, intermediate, advanced. 9th grade intermediate would equal 10th grade beginner. The students progress from one level to the next at their own pace while teachers rotate which level they teach. One teacher would teach beginner one year and intermediate the next and so on. Students would be required to at least complete the beginner level for 12th graders in order to graduate. Students that complete the program early can take electives in the final years in school. This alternative would also provide tutoring for those students who struggle to advance. This is a good alternative because I strongly agree that we need to have bare minimum requirements for graduation. This way a high school diploma would actually mean something. A college degree would again be worth getting and maybe a law student could actually get a job out of law school.^{xxiv}

V. Conclusion

Tracking appears to be geared to benefit the top tier of students. The question we need to ask of ourselves is whether that's the group that we need to address in our educational system? The real problem is the amount of drop outs we have. The real problem is the amount of Americans who can't do arithmetic. The real problem is the

amount of college seniors who fail the ACT math section and thus can't get into a good college. The real problem is that we need to be afraid of the occasional intelligent black man. Minorities are at a distinct disadvantage. Poor people remain poor. The educational system only perpetuates this demoralizing reality. This gruesome reality needs to be stopped. The first step needs to be in early education. That first step is to discontinue using tracking in schools.

ⁱ Sarah Keiser, Stratification, Disillusionment, and Hopelessness: The Consequences of Tracking and Ability Grouping

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^{iv} Sarah Keiser, Stratification, Disillusionment, and Hopelessness: The Consequences of Tracking and Ability Grouping

^v The Principals Partnership Research Brief: Tracking and Ability Grouping

^{vi} Sarah Keiser, Stratification, Disillusionment, and Hopelessness: The Consequences of Tracking and Ability Grouping

^{vii} Jay Hill, Tracking in Schools... A thing of the Past?

^{viii} *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

^{ix} Sarah Keiser, Stratification, Disillusionment, and Hopelessness: The Consequences of Tracking and Ability Grouping

^x Tracking in Schools... A thing of the past?

^{xi} Sarah Keiser, Stratification, Disillusionment, and Hopelessness: The Consequences of Tracking and Ability Grouping

^{xii} Tracking of Students is an Unwise Policy

^{xiii} Tracking in Schools... A thing of the past?

^{xiv} Sarah Keiser, Stratification, Disillusionment, and Hopelessness: The Consequences of Tracking and Ability Grouping

^{xv} The Effects of Homogenous Grouping in Mathematics. ERIC/CSMEE Digest

^{xvi} The Effects of Homogenous Grouping in Mathematics. ERIC/CSMEE Digest

^{xvii} Sarah Keiser, Stratification, Disillusionment, and Hopelessness: The Consequences of Tracking and Ability Grouping

^{xviii} Sarah Keiser, Stratification, Disillusionment, and Hopelessness: The Consequences of Tracking and Ability Grouping

^{xix} The Principals Partnership Research Brief: Tracking and Ability Grouping

^{xx} Tracking in Schools... A thing of the Past?

^{xxi} Should Students be Tracked in Math or Science? Eric Digest.

^{xxii} Sarah Keiser, Stratification, Disillusionment, and Hopelessness: The Consequences of Tracking and Ability Grouping

^{xxiii} Sarah Keiser, Stratification, Disillusionment, and Hopelessness: The Consequences of Tracking and Ability Grouping

^{xxiv} Sarah Keiser, Stratification, Disillusionment, and Hopelessness: The Consequences of Tracking and Ability Grouping