

What is Tracking and Ability Grouping?

Tracking and ability grouping is one of the most hotly debated topics in education today. Historically, Ability Grouping has been referring to “the formation of small, homogeneous groups within elementary school classrooms, usually for reading instruction. Children of approximately the same level of reading proficiency would be grouped for reading instruction...” (Loveless). Meanwhile, Tracking has been referring to “a practice in which high schools tested students, typically with both achievement and IQ tests, and used these scores to place their students into separate curricular tracks...” (Loveless). Tracking can also be defined as a mean of placing students into “class-size groups based on a measure of the students' perceived ability or prior achievement” (George, 1988). It takes a variety of forms, including remedial and special education programs, as well as programs for gifted and talented students. Because students are placed in specialized groups, tracking and ability grouping is often called as homogenous grouping. This type of homogeneous grouping allows “schools to create a structure that permitted specialization and a division of labor” (Oakes, 2003). Many educators believe that classrooms full of students with similar abilities would allow teachers to “mass-produce learning” at the same time. Such practice is based on the management in the division of labor. In the factory, individual differences were not valued. Differences along the assembly line resulted in product defects. So, as with the schools, individual differences within the group often were seen as problems. In theory, tracking and ability grouping increase student achievement by reducing the differences in students' ability level. “The assumption is that ability grouping allows the teacher (1) to increase the pace and raise the level of instruction for high achievers, and (2) to provide more individual

attention, repetition, and review for low achievers” (Hollifield, 1988). However, many studies have indicated that tracking and ability grouping are inflexible and permanent. It can limit students’ academic development by defining both student and teacher expectations for success. Tracking and ability grouping deny equity in education by denying students the right to exposing culturally and linguistically diversity.

Tracking/Ability Grouping and the Secondary Classroom

Tracking and ability tracking have long dated back in the mid of 19th century (Loveless). In the beginning, the education system was “shaped like a pyramid”. Public schools at the bottom educated broad mass of American children. As the students proceed to higher grades, the number of enrolling students begins to reduce (Cuban, 1995). Tracking and ability grouping have been unfair to the students because they were 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” (Loveless). It therefore creates an unfair environment in which students from less advantaged or minority backgrounds are not able to achieve as much as students from other backgrounds. Poor or minority students are usually assigned to classes of lower tracks, even though some of them may be better at learning a particular subject than the wealthier students. Students assigned to low tracks usually find themselves confined forever in those vocational and general classes, and, at the same time, their desire to advance into the higher tracks are usually not considered by the teachers and schools, who fears that those students would hinder the progress of the higher tracks.

De-tracking and the Secondary Classroom

As a result of growing criticism of tracking and ability grouping, many schools have begun to eliminate the practice. The process of de-tracking has not been a very clear one, as the same terms are still employed, but with different practices. In fact, tracking is now used to help the students explore their potential. Instead of having the schools and teachers decide on what class each student can take, the students now can make their own choices as long as they can prove that they are capable of handling the classes they want to pursue. “Today, ... 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” (Loveless). Schools no longer use IQ tests to place students in classes. Instead, class assignment is now based on students’ ability in that particular subject, and the students’ grades in previous classes. Placement is also often negotiable by students or parents. “Parents and students who are willing to risk lower grades for a more rigorous education routinely gain access to the courses that they want” (Loveless).

Personal Reflection

Tracking and ability grouping started as the results of teachers thinking they have all the answers to the education of the children in our society. Teachers and schools implemented strict processes of how and what the children should be taught, in a way that they thought would create students who would contribute better to the society after they

leave school. In reality, that system of educating students in a mechanical way hasn't been beneficial to the majority of students nor the society as a whole.

On the other hand, complete elimination of the tracking and ability grouping practices may not seem like a good idea either. A complete elimination of such practices means that the students can take on any class they like, regardless of their learning ability, previous knowledge of the subject, or consideration of what they want to achieve in and out of school.

Tracking provides a strict systematic way of learning that may hinder the students from reaching their potential in learning, while de-tracking provides a chaotic way of learning that may prevent the students from learning anything at all. Tracked students are put in classes which they may not even be slightly interested or understand, but de-tracked students may always be exploring new and interesting classes which they may not have enough ability or knowledge to understand. It's therefore that a careful mixture of tracking and de-tracking may be more beneficial to the students. Regardless of the different learning pattern and ability each student has, it is critical that education is done in a systematic way, but it should still be allowed that the students have the option of choosing the classes which they feel will benefit them the most in the future, based on their previous learning and achievement. In other words, teachers and schools should plan their teachings around the education background of their students. Basic skills that are essential in surviving in the society should be mandatory of all students, regardless of how fast or slow they learn. Upon completion of those basic skill classes, teachers should then get more involved with each students in finding out more about their interests

and goals are, and how to help them achieve. It is then when the teachers can be able to plan more appropriately on the type of class each student should be assigned to.

Therefore, it's important for each school to get a better understanding of their students first before the teachers can device a system that will be the most beneficial to the students. Perhaps the idea of pre-requisites and electives used widely in universities should be employed in our secondary schools as well. This way a standard of learning the basic skills can be achieved, using a systematic way, while later on the students are free to explore their potentials by being allowed to pursue any class they, with the guidance of their teachers, see fit for what they want to achieve in the future.