

Tracking and Ability Grouping

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This paper was completed and submitted in partial fulfillment of the Master Teacher Program, a 2-year faculty professional development program conducted by the Center for Teaching Excellence, United States Military Academy, West Point, NY, 2008.

Tracking or ability grouping is one of the most controversial topics in education today. Literally thousands of papers have been written arguing both for and against the practice of tracking. This paper will present an overview of tracking, consider the advantages and disadvantages of tracking, and finally review some of the most prominent research done on the topic today.

What is tracking and ability grouping? Often used interchangeably, tracking and ability grouping are not the same. In *The Tracking and Ability Grouping Debate* (1998), Tom Loveless defines them as follows.

Ability Grouping – Elementary schools typically use ability grouping in reading instruction. Students are organized into groups within classes, creating “bluebirds” and “redbirds,” for example, with instruction targeted to each group’s reading level.

Tracking – Middle schools and high schools use tracking to group students between classes, offering courses in academic subjects that reflect difference in students’ prior learning. One student who is an outstanding reader may take an honors English course, while another student who struggles with reading may take a remedial reading course. An eight grade math whiz may tackle high school courses (algebra or geometry) while other pupils are still learning how to work with fractions.

Also, to understand the tracking debate one must also understand the different types of tracking. A Principals’ Partnership research brief by Mike Muir (2007) on tracking points out

what Robert Slavin, a top proponent of ability grouping, believes there are five types of ability grouping in use with differing levels of effectiveness and success.

- Grouping students as a class by ability for all subjects doesn't improve achievement.
- Students grouped heterogeneously for most of the school day, but regrouped according to ability for one or two subjects, can improve achievement in those areas for which they are grouped.
- Grouping heterogeneously except for reading instruction (commonly referred to as "The Joplin Plan") improves reading achievement.
- Nongraded instruction – instruction that groups students according to ability rather than age and that allows students to progress at their own rates – can result in improved achievement.
- In-class grouping – a common approach in which teacher break out two or three ability-based groups within a class for instruction – can benefit student achievement. (Slavin's research supports this practice for math instruction. Findings related to reading instruction aren't as conclusive; in-class grouping is so widespread a practice for teaching reading that it's difficult to find "control groups" for such a comparative study.)

A Brief History

Ability grouping has a long history in the United States. At the start of the 20th century with the immergence of the industrial era, parents wanted their children to have more than they had and improve their overall standing in life. This resulted in a push by all students, not just the well off, to complete high school, and ushered in the idea of tracking and ability grouping. (Willingham, 2007).

Tracking was again brought to the forefront of education in the 1950's when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik. Tracking was the United States' answer to the perceived threat from the Russians by attempting to rapidly develop America's smartest and brightest. These trends toward tracking shaped the way schools are organized and structured today. (Talbot, 2008).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Tracking

Proponents of ability grouping and tracking, of which there are many, make some compelling arguments. First, let's consider advantages from the teacher perspective. Curriculum and ultimately lesson planning can be directed at the target audience allowing for an adjusted classroom pace tailored to the students. This naturally leads to easier classroom management which in the end, allows for more time spend on lesson preparation. (Willingham, 2007).

From the student's perspective, the advantages of ability grouping are just as compelling. Students work with peers of similar ability which allows for increased challenge for gifted students and an increase in self-esteem by all students by not competing against peers that are brighter than them (Ansalone, 2003).

The case against tracking can be just as easily argued. Proponents of untracking argue that tracking promotes segregation in the classroom along both racial and socioeconomic lines (Ansalone, 2003). It is also argued that high ability grouped classrooms receive a disproportionately large amount of money and resources as well as the best teachers. Low ability group classes many times taught by the least-experienced or sometimes even the "bad" teachers (Willingham, 2007). Additionally, Anne Wheelock (1992) states that, "Once students are grouped, they generally stay at that level for their school careers, and the gap between achievement levels becomes exaggerated over time. The notion that students' achievement levels at any given time will predict their achievement in the future becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy." Finally, tracking can result in a social stigmatism for lower achieving students, which has been shown to affect academic performance (Hallinan, 1994).

What the Experts Say

There has been no shortage of studies on ability grouping and tracking in recent years, some advocating tracking and others against it. In 1998, Tom Loveless analyzed two prominent researchers in the field, Robert Slavin who is whole-heartedly opposed to tracking, and James G. Kulik, who believes that certain forms of tracking and ability grouping have merit. What he discovered was interesting (Loveless, 1998).

Essentially, both believe that ability grouping does not hurt student achievement. They differ on this point in that Kulik thinks that tracking does improve academic achievement for gifted students and therefore is worthwhile under certain circumstances. Slavin thinks that tracking does not benefit any set of students, believes it to be “inegalitarian and anti-democratic” and therefore should not be done under any circumstances (Loveless, 1998).

Regardless of what the research says, tracking is still widely used in U.S. public schools today. A 1993 *Solutions and Strategies* (Crosby, 1993) paper says, “Eighty-five percent (85%) of the research says tracking is not beneficial while eighty-five percent (85%) of the school continue to practice it (George, 1988)”. There is still much information to be collected and more studies to be conducted and hopefully, in the end, the question of whether to track students or not to track students will be answered once and for all.

Annotated Readings:

Ansalone, George. *Poverty, tracking, and the social construction of failure: International perspectives on tracking*. 9(1). *Journal of Children & Poverty*, 2003. 3-20.

This paper considered tracking and its effects on students from a point of view of poverty. Ansalone points out that low income children tend to be placed in low ability groups and this can help perpetuate the poverty cycle by resulting in low academic achievement. He considers this more from a socioeconomic view than from an educational view. He concludes the paper with several policy considerations for administrators.

Kulik, James A. & Kulik, Chen-Lin C. *Effects of Ability Grouping on Secondary School Students: A Meta-Analysis of Evaluation Findings*. Vol. 19, No. 3. *American Educational Research Journal*, Fall 1982. 415-428.

James Kulik is a strong advocate of ability grouping. This paper analyzes the results of 52 studies in secondary schools on ability grouping and achievement. Kulik concludes that there is a measurable increase in achievement for all students due to ability grouping with an especially evident improvement for gifted students. He also finds that student attitudes toward education and school are improved when students are ability grouped.

Loveless, Thomas B. *The Tracking and Ability Grouping Debate*. Retrieved 18 March 2008 from the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation website:

www.edexcellence.net/foundation/publication/publication.cfm?id=127.

This is a comprehensive study of tracking and ability grouping completed for the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. It is divided into four sections. Section one defines the relevant terms and gets into current tracking in both middle and high schools. Section two covers the history of tracking here in the United States. Section three is in-depth coverage of the research in the field with a very good focus on two of the most prominent researchers in ability grouping, Robert Slavin and James A. Kulik. Section four covers some principles of future policy based on the research of section three.

Provus, Malcolm M. *Ability Grouping in Arithmetic*. Vol. 60, No. 7. *The Elementary School Journal*, Apr 1960. 391-398.

This paper is a study of an on-going research project in a Chicago suburb school system from the late 1950's. What is interesting about this paper is that Provus addresses the concerns and opinions of the teachers involved in the study.

Slavin, Robert E. *Achievement Effects of Ability Grouping in Secondary Schools: A Best-Evidence Synthesis*. Vol. 60, No. 3. *Review of Educational Research*, Fall 1990. 471-499.

Robert Slavin is a prominent education researcher and one of the top critics of ability grouping. This article is a comprehensive analysis of all studies conducted on ability grouping in secondary schools. The prominent theme of the article is that no students, either gifted or lower ability, benefit from ability grouping no matter what the subject or how the ability grouping is implemented.

West, Jane. *Grouping Pupils by Ability*. *Gifted and Talented Update*, Dec 2005. Optimus Education newsletter. 4-5.

This paper appeared as an article in the Gifted and Talented Update and talks about ability grouping from the perspective of the United Kingdom. It first defines the pro and cons of tracking and then talks about the pro and cons of mixed-group classes. An interesting aspect of this article is that it looks at ability grouping by gender, a topic not found in most US literature on the issue.

Additional Resources:

Allan, Susan Demirsky. *Ability-Grouping Research Reviews: What Do They Say about Grouping and the Gifted?* Vol. 48, No. 6. *Educational Leadership*, Mar 1991.

Boaler, Jo, William, Dylan, & Brown, Margaret. *Students' experiences of ability grouping and disaffection, polarization and the construction of failure.* Vol. 26, No. 5. *British Education Research Journal*, 2000. 631-648.

Crosby, Margaree S. & Owens, Emma M. *The Disadvantages of Tracking and Ability Grouping: A Look at Cooperative Learning as an Alternative.* No. 5, *Solutions and Strategies*, National Dropout Prevention Center Newsletter. March 1993.

Hallinan, Maureen T. *Tracking: From Theory to Practice.* Vol. 67, No. 2. *Sociology of Education*, Apr 1994. 79-84.

Hallinan, Maureen T. *Ability Grouping and Student Learning.* Brookings Papers on Education Policy, 2003. 95-140.

Hopkins, Gary. *Is Ability Grouping the Way to Go---Or Should It Go Away?* Retrieved 18 March 2008 from the Education World website:
www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin009.shtml.

Muir, Michael. *Tracking & Ability Grouping.* Retrieved 17 March 2008 from The Principals' Partnership website: www.principalspartnership.com/tracking.pdf.

Slavin, Robert E. *Ability Grouping in Elementary Schools: Do We Really Know Nothing until We Know Everything?* Vol. 57, No. 3, *Review of Educational Research*, Fall, 1987. 347-350.

Slavin, Robert E. *Mastery Learning Re-Reconsidered.* Vol. 60, No. 2, *Review of Educational Research*, Summer 1990. 300-302.

Swiatek, Mary Ann. *Ability Grouping: Answers to Common Questions.* C-MITES News, Spring 2001, Carnegie-Mellon Institute for Talented Elementary and Secondary Students.

Talbott, Shannon Peters. *Beaten Track.* Retrieved 24 March 2008 from Santa Clara University Ethics website: www.scu.edu/ethics/publications/submitted/talbott/beatentrack.html.

Wheelock, Anne. *Crossing the Tracks: How "Untracking" Can Save America's Schools.* Retrieved 18 March 2008 from Middleweb website: www.middleweb.com/Whlcktrack.html.