

**The Consequences of Tracking and 'Ability Grouping' in
Racially and Ethically Diverse Schools***

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There is considerable evidence that even when school populations are diverse, students within the school, and within classrooms, are often resegregated (Heck, Price, & Thomas, 2004; Mickelson, 2001; Oakes, 2005). Clearly, schools that adopt practices that result in the racial and ethnic resegregation of students reduce or largely eliminate the potential benefits of diverse learning opportunities. Racial and ethnic resegregation is never an explicit policy. However, because African American, Latino, and Native Alaskan and American Indian students, as well as some Asian students, are disproportionately low-income and often score lower on tests of achievement than other students, policies and practices that are intended to focus resources on students with special needs often separate many students of color from their White peers in school. Moreover, there is evidence that non-White students are more likely to be placed in remedial classes than White students of similar tested ability (see Mickelson, 2001).

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The segregation of students by race and ethnicity within schools is the product of four types of strategies: tracking, instructional (i.e., "ability") grouping, pullout programs for students with special needs, and differential teaching practices that minimize cognitive demand on low-achieving students. While the distinction may break down in some cases where ability grouping and special programs lead to formal and informal tracking, it seems useful to examine these practices separately.

Tracking: Tracking groups students for instruction based on prior measures of their academic achievement and keeps students in the same groups over time and across subjects. Tracking can be the result of formal school policies or, more often, is the consequence of actions by teachers and counselors, or decisions by students and their parents (Heck, Price, & Thomas, 2004; Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002; Lucas, 1999). For example, students who are struggling in school often select less-demanding classes (Ferguson & Mehta, 2004, p. 663) and this self-tracking is acceded to, and often supported, by teachers and counselors. Two arguments that support tracking are: (1) it allows teachers to focus content on students' level of achievement, and (2) teachers who are unable to effectively teach in heterogeneous settings will better serve students

when the students are in homogeneous groups.

There is some research that supports tracking, challenging the long-held consensus among researchers that the potential benefits of tracking are outweighed by the likely costs to most students (Figlio & Page, 2000; Loveless, 1998). Kulik (1992) concludes that when students in different tracks are taught with the same proficiency and matched with appropriate curricula, students at all levels of achievement benefit. The preponderance of research, however, suggests that tracking has negative consequences for all but the highest lower-achieving students. For example, researchers have shown that (1) the performance level of a student's peers significantly affect student performance, especially for lower-achieving students and older students (Betts, Zau, & Rice, 2003; Hoxby, 2000); (2) students in lower ability groups tend to be taught by less experienced and less qualified teachers (Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997) and otherwise receive routinely inferior instruction (Ferguson & Mehta, 2004); (3) learning opportunities for students in lower-achieving groups are often "dumbed-down" and do not provide the level of learning needed to be successful in college or in the workplace (Burris, Heubert, & Levin, 2004; Gamoran, et al., 1995); and (4) students of color are more likely to be

assigned to less demanding courses than their ability warrants (Mickelson, 2001).

The National Center on English Learning and Achievement (CELA) has succinctly summarized a common consequence of tracking:

Because track assignments are usually determined by students' prior achievement and since prior achievement is usually associated with SES, students of higher SES are usually over-represented in the higher tracks, and students of lower SES in the lower tracks. And since instruction differs between the tracks in ways that privilege higher track students, the overall effect is to widen the achievement gap between high and low performing students over time (CELA, 2003, p. 3).

Two relatively recent reports by panels of prominent scholars conclude that tracking undermines the quality of education received by children in the lower tracks and does not help many other students (Heubert & Hauser, 1999; National Academy of Education, 1999). Hanushek and Wobmann (2005) studied international assessments of student performance and conclude that early tracking increases educational inequality and reduces mean achievement. Thus, while recognizing that students have different capabilities

that need to be addressed, including students with exceptionally high academic achievement or truly unique abilities, it seems safe to say that tracking is a practice that usually does not benefit most students. However, there is research that suggests that tracking benefits the highest-achieving students when the measure is performance on standardized tests (Heck, Price, & Thomas, 2004). It may be that higher-achieving students can achieve at least as well in heterogeneous classrooms as in tracked classes, but this probably requires that teachers employ a repertoire of instructional strategies that is not commonly in evidence.

Need-based Instructional Grouping: Grouping students for instruction on the basis of past academic performance, is commonly called "ability grouping". The distinction between ability grouping and tracking I make here is the extent to which students learn in classes with students of similar prior achievement. Teachers overwhelmingly favor ability grouping that minimizes differences among students' current achievement levels (Wadsworth, 2004).

Ability grouping often turns into tracking and some critics of tracking equate it with ability grouping. Because there is considerable agreement about the need for grouping students who face similar learning challenges for specific purposes and times, most often in literacy and

mathematics, it seems useful to define what is being discussed here as flexible needs-based instructional grouping. There are two main issues fueling considerable debate about how flexible needs-based grouping should be implemented: (1) How heterogeneous should groups be?, and (2) If groups are homogeneous, how much time should students spend in such homogeneous groups? These issues apply when assigning students to classes, across classes, and within classrooms.

There are complex considerations related to needs-based grouping that should be addressed in order to maximize the learning of students. These include:

1. The students and faculty involved, the subject matter, and the resources--both human and material--to which schools have access, affect the efficacy of any educational strategy and this is surely the case with respect to needs-based grouping.

2. Outcomes other than scores on academic tests, which capture a small range of student learning, should be taken into account when evaluating the potential effects of an educational practice such as instructional grouping. Such other outcomes include student participation in high-demand curricula, attendance, and persistence in school.

3. Students learn many things in schools that aren't

well assessed, if they are assessed at all. One of the most important of these may be the capability to learn with and from others, especially others who have different dispositions and experiences. In many cases, groups and classes that are homogeneous in terms of academic performance may also be relatively homogeneous with respect to race and ethnicity. Students learning in racially and ethnically homogeneous groups will have less opportunity than other students to develop the knowledge and skills they will need to be successful in multicultural communities and workplaces (Banks, et al., 2001; Hawley, 2003; Hawley, et al., 1995; Laosa, 2002).

Students differ in their readiness to pursue particular learning objectives. Needs-based grouping based on prior achievement tests is a much used and sometimes necessary instructional strategy. Because needs-based grouping takes many forms and has many purposes, it is not possible to say that needs-based grouping does or does not work. Tests of the efficacy of grouping in promoting academically productive interracial and interethnic contact in diverse schools include:

1. Do such practice results in sorting students by race and ethnicity?

2. How specific and well-defined are the learning needs being addressed?
3. How much of the school day do students find themselves learning with the same group?
4. Do the student groupings remain stable over time and from class to class?

Schools that fail these tests are, in effect, tracking students and the justification for sorting students in order to accelerate their learning and the consequences are likely to be negative. Whatever decisions are made about instructional grouping within or across classes, educators and parents should, for each student, continually ask whether there is solid evidence that the practices being implemented benefit the students involved.

While the consensus among researchers supports flexible and varied approaches to needs-based instructional grouping, the fact that students influence the performance of their peers poses a dilemma for educators--and parents. Homogeneous grouping would seem to be in the interests of the most academically able students, at least with respect to academic performance, and to have negative consequences for lower-achieving students (Heck, Price, & Thomas, 2004). One way in which educators may address this dilemma is to engage in strategies such as differentiated instruction and

make efforts to challenge all students to excel (Slavin, 1995b; Tomlinson, 2003; Burris & Welner, this volume). As noted earlier, not every teacher is prepared to implement a broad instructional repertoire.

Pullout programs: Like needs-based grouping, pullout programs come in many forms. For purposes here, they are programs that take students out of their regular classroom for certain subjects, such as reading. In general, the available evidence is negative relating to pullout programs that have remedial purpose. The same tests that apply to needs-based grouping can be applied to these programs. Programs to meet the needs of English Language Learners represent a particular challenge (Laosa, 2002). This may be especially true when employing bilingual education, which recent reviews of research suggest is the most effective approach to English language learning (Slavin & Chueng, 2004; Rolstad, Mahoney & Glass, 2005).

Low-level instruction for low-achieving students: Most studies of tracking and ability grouping focus on students' experiences within academically homogeneous groups, but even within classes that are not formally grouped by ability, students may systematically receive different levels of instruction; low-achieving students predictably receive less sophisticated instruction and are expected to

achieve at lower levels (Good, 1987). This not only affects achievement but it almost certainly discourages social interaction among students who have received different treatment from teachers.