



Research Brief

Tracking & Ability Grouping

Question: What is the research on “tracking” students?

Summary of Findings:

“Tracking” or “ability grouping” is the widespread practice of grouping students by their academic ability. At the root of the practice is the question of how to educate large groups of students whose backgrounds and abilities differ widely. The assumption is that if students are grouped by their abilities, then they can get the instruction they need to learn the academic material. The real question, of course, is “does it work?”

Tracking is one of the most controversial practices in education today. Tom Loveless sums up the debate this way:

Tracking and ability grouping have fueled a debate spanning virtually the entire twentieth century. Tracking has received especially harsh criticism. Critics charge that tracking not only fails to benefit any student, but that it also channels poor and minority students into low tracks and dooms a vast number of students to an impoverished education. Defenders of tracking, on the other hand, argue that high ability students languish in mixed ability classes, that it is nearly impossible, for example, for teachers to lead students through the plot twists of *King Lear* while simultaneously instructing in phonics.

Making heads or tails of the research is difficult since for every research study that refutes tracking, there seems to be another that supports it. According to the North Central Regional Education Lab, tracking based on the student's ability, which determines course content, the number of courses, and often the career path that a student chooses, has had the following negative results:

- Trimble and Sinclair (1988) and Oakes and Lipton (1992) (both cited in Century, 1994) point out that a disproportionate number of minority and low-income students are placed in low-ability groups and tracks.
- Oakes, et al. (1990), studied the effect of race, social class, and tracking on opportunities to learn in mathematics and science and found that:
"During the elementary grades, the science and mathematics experiences of children from low-income families, African-American and Hispanic children, children who attend school in central cities, and children who have been clustered in 'low-ability classes' differ in small but important ways from those of their more advantaged and white peers. By the time the students reach secondary school, their science and mathematics experiences are strikingly different."
- Students in low-ability tracks tend to receive lower-quality instruction. Their instruction covers less content, involves more drill and repetition, and places more emphasis on classroom management tasks (Dreeben & Gamoran, 1986; Gamoran, 1986, 1987; Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Oakes, 1985, 1989; Sorensen & Halinan, 1986; Veldman & Sanford, 1984 [all cited in Secada, 1992]).
- Students in low-ability tracks have difficulty moving out of low tracks into higher tracks (Century, 1994).

Anne Wheelock says that tracking is harmful to students for a number of reasons:

- The criteria we use to group kids are based on subjective perceptions and fairly narrow views of intelligence.
- Tracking leads students to take on labels — both in their own minds as well as in the minds of their teachers — that are usually associated with the pace of learning (such as the "slow" or "fast" learners). Because of this, we end up confusing students' pace of learning with their capacity to learn.



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- We associate students' placement with the type of learners they are and therefore create different expectations for different groups of students.
- 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.

There is not just one approach to ability grouping, however. An Education World article points out that when Robert Slavin reviewed the research on different types of ability grouping in elementary schools, he found that some forms of grouping can result in increased student achievement.

- 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 teachers 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.)

One of the groups that argues most strongly in favor of tracking are the parents, teachers, and supporters of academically gifted students. They argue that ability grouping is not elitist, that it has been shown to improve achievement for gifted students, and that gifted students will not necessarily reach their potential without opportunities to receive accelerated instruction in the context of working with other gifted students. By studying the original research ability grouping (especially as it impacts gifted students), Susan Demirsky Allan draws the following conclusions:

- Gifted and high-ability children show positive academic effects from some forms of homogenous grouping. The strongest positive academic effects of grouping for gifted students result from either acceleration or classes that are specially designed for the gifted and use specially trained teachers and differentiated curriculum and methods. In fact, all students, whether grouped or not, should be experiencing a differentiated curriculum that provides options geared to their learning styles and ability levels.
- Average- and low-ability children may benefit academically from certain types of grouping, particularly elementary school regrouping for specific subject areas such as reading and mathematics, as well as from within-class grouping. These benefits may be small. These students show very little benefit from wholesale grouping by general ability.
- The preponderance of evidence does not support the contention that children are academically harmed by grouping.
- Students' attitudes toward specific subjects are improved by grouping in those subjects. However, grouping does not have any effect on their attitudes toward school.
- It is unclear whether grouping has any effect on the self-esteem of students in the general school population. However, effects on self-esteem are small but positive for low-ability children and slightly negative for average- and high-ability children. There is limited evidence that remedial programs have a positive effect on the self-esteem of slow learners.



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Wynne Harlen points out that the ambiguity in research results may come from the fact that tracking is a very difficult practice to research. Although it seems straightforward – comparing ability grouped classrooms to mixed ability classrooms – the relative performance of pupils is affected by many variables other than the mix of ability. Harlen points to class size, ability range (in some studies, classes labeled mixed-ability may have been more similar in ability than classes labeled as ability-based in other studies), teaching methods and materials, the degree of differentiation, the attitude of the teacher towards mixed-ability teaching and the curriculum content as examples. Harlen goes on to say:

A common theme in the conclusions from the studies was that what goes on in classrooms seems likely to have more impact on achievement than how pupils are grouped. Differences in classroom materials and learning activities often explained differences in achievement. For example, in a study where pupils in the high-ability group were found to benefit over similar pupils in mixed-ability classes, the difference was ascribed to the former using classroom materials (in math), which took them far beyond what was expected for their age or grade.

In fact, tracking may not be the issue at all, but rather instruction. The theory behind ability grouping is that teachers can use instructional approaches that are better suited to the “abilities” of the students. Research results can be explained if gifted students are receiving those enhanced instructional strategies, but challenging students are receiving mostly lecture and drill. Further, the theory of detracking (mixed ability groups) is based again on instruction: using strategies to differentiate the learning and engage all students in learning regardless of their background, motivations, past achievement, or ability. Likewise, the success of detracking depends on the quality of that instruction. If detracking has not been proven in the research, perhaps it is because only the grouping was changed, not the instruction.

In an Eric Digest on Alternatives to Ability Grouping, Gary Burnett suggests what some of those instructional strategies might be:

For example, programs may consist of interdisciplinary or integrated curricula that is built around a theme. They may also include hands-on projects, attention to social issues, real-world experiences, and involvement in community projects. Such programs often call on teachers to personalize their instruction to meet the needs of individual students and to find techniques that teach study skills and emphasize learning as a process rather than as rote memorization (Wheelock, 1992). Oakes and Lipton (1993) outline some of the hallmarks of such approaches. The strategies:

- emphasize thinking skills and student responsibility rather than memorization of facts;
- treat learning as a complex process;
- provide a context within which to learn facts;
- allow for multiple right answers; and
- are long-term projects.

Online Resources:

The Tracking and Ability Grouping Debate

By Tom Loveless for The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation

This report is about tracking and ability grouping, the practice of grouping students of similar ability or prior achievement together for instruction. It is presented in four sections. The first defines terms, sketches the basic features of tracking and ability grouping systems, and describes recent changes in these practices. The second section traces the historical quest for reasonable ways of matching students and curriculum. The third part reviews the research, particularly on those aspects of tracking and ability grouping most often objected to by critics. The final section lays out three general principles for future policy.

<http://www.edexcellence.net/foundation/publication/publication.cfm?id=127>

Grouping practices

Grouping practices - especially tracking - often have the effect of reducing equity. Research generally shows that tracking and between-class ability grouping benefit students who are placed in high-end tracks or groups while having a detrimental effect on students placed in low-end tracks or groups (see, e.g., Secada, 1992).

<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/content/contareas/science/malgroup.htm>



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Hot Topic: Does Ability Grouping Help or Hurt?

A Talk with Anne Wheelock

Grouping students by ability is one of the most talked-about topics in education. Does it benefit students? Inhibit their learning? Not matter? To bring you this report, Senior Editor Meg Bozzone spoke to Anne Wheelock, author of *Crossing the Tracks: How "Untracking" Can Save America's Schools* (New Press, 1992).

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/classmgmt/abilitygroup.htm>

Is Ability Grouping the Way to Go---Or Should It Go Away?

Logic, emotion, and research often clash in the longstanding debate over the advantages and disadvantages of ability grouping (tracking). Should it be left up to the courts to decide whether such grouping is fair or not? Is ability grouping (or tracking) an efficient way to handle differences in student abilities? Does such grouping benefit students---or does it unfairly label them? Research, logic, and emotion often clash when responding to those questions.

http://www.education-world.com/a_issues/issues002.shtml

In Search of Reality: Unraveling the Myths about Tracking, Ability Grouping, and the Gifted

Ellen D. Fiedler; Richard E. Lange; Susan Winebrenner

The antitracking movement has suddenly become anti-ability grouping, resulting in serious side-effects for gifted students who currently are being served effectively in ability-grouped programs that consistently meet their needs. Six commonly-held myths are examined and discussed in relationship to educators' efforts to provide the best instructional programs for all students, including those whose abilities place them at the upper end of the spectrum.

Originally published in *Roeper Review*, 16, September 1993, pp. 4-7.

<http://www.tagparents.org/reality.htm>

Ability-Grouping Research Reviews: What Do They Say about Grouping and the Gifted?

Susan Demirsky Allan

Educational Leadership - March 1991

If educators are to make informed decisions based on the findings about ability grouping, they must study the original research and be sure that the questions they are asking are the same ones posed by the researchers.

<http://www.donet.com/~eprice/sdallan.htm>

Making Sense of the Research on Ability Grouping

Wynne Harlen

Reviewing research on the effects of grouping pupils by ability could easily generate cynicism about educational research. There is something to please everyone – some studies lend support to grouping by ability, some point in the opposite direction and many show that there is little difference that can be ascribed only to the type of grouping. The reasons for so much ambiguity arise because this is a very difficult area for research.

<http://www.scre.ac.uk/rie/nl60/nl60harlen.html>

Alternatives to Ability Grouping: Still Unanswered Questions.

Burnett, Gary

In its simplest form, detracking involves little more than a shift in the makeup of classes. More comprehensive forms of detracking also change the pedagogy and curriculum. *ERIC/CUE Digest* Number 111.

<http://www.ericdigests.org/1996-3/ability.htm>

An Analysis Of The Research On Ability Grouping

Kulik, J.

ERIC ED 367 095 1993

Educational researchers formulated the basic questions about ability grouping decades ago. Does anyone benefit from grouping? Who benefits most? Is anyone harmed? How? How much? Why? But after more than a half-century of analysis and interpretation, reviewers of the research findings have still not reached agreement on the answers. For every research reviewer who has concluded that grouping is helpful, there is another who has concluded that it is harmful.

http://www.gt-cybersource.org/Record.aspx?NavID=2_0&rid=11496



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Alternatives to Ability Grouping: Still Unanswered Questions.

Burnett, Gary

ERIC/CUE Digest Number 111.

The question at the heart of the tracking debate is how best to educate large numbers of students whose backgrounds and abilities differ widely. Many studies of tracking have found that the practice has little, if any, direct impact on student achievement. Critics suggest, however, that ability grouping all too often limits the instructional experience of lower-track students to little more than rote drill on basic skills. Further, because mobility between tracks is rare, students placed in low tracks at a young age may never be transferred to the upper tracks where higher-order skills are typically taught.

ERIC Identifier: ED390947

<http://www.ericdigests.org/1996-3/ability.htm>

Ability Grouping

These materials are intended to provide an introduction to Ability Grouping. They were assembled from the World Wide Web, ERIC Database, and a variety of other bibliographic resources. Instructions for acquiring the full text of the ERIC records is presented at the end of this file.

<http://www.indiana.edu/~reading/ieo/bibs/ability.html>

Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality

According to Oakes, students in the top tracks gain nothing from grouping and other students suffer clear and consistent disadvantages, including loss of academic ground, self-esteem, and ambition. Oakes also believes that tracking is unfair to students because it denies them their right to a common curriculum.

Oakes, J. (1985) Keeping track: How schools structure inequality. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

<http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/book.asp?isbn=0300108303>

Ability Grouping, Tracking, & Alternatives

WISE (Ithaca College's Working to Improve Schools and Education)

A list of resources on ability grouping

<http://www.ithaca.edu/wise/topics/ability.htm>

What We Know About Academically Talented Students: Ability Grouping and Acceleration

The Center for Talented Youth, Johns Hopkins University

CTY's Research Department develops and carries out a systematic research agenda for CTY, as well as facilitating research across the organization. Research projects fall into three broad categories: Educational Studies with Policy Implications, Psychological Studies, and Longitudinal Studies. The Research Department also ensures that CTY's programmatic and assessment initiatives are routinely evaluated through a series of Evaluation Studies.

<http://cty.jhu.edu/research/whatweknow.html>

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