

In Defense of Tracking

Students are equal under law, not in ability. Appropriate tracking accommodates individual differences, but makes "high-status knowledge available to all."



Tracking was born "the first time an enterprising young teacher in a one-room schoolhouse in the 1880s divided his students into those who knew how to read and those who didn't." It lives on in this fifth-grade reading group in the 1980s.

In his book, *A Place Called School*, John Goodlad presents a dire picture of low-level tracked classes. These classes, he says, are characterized by unmotivated teachers teaching uninspired students; the material has little significant content or relevance. The picture he presents is enough to embarrass any educator who has ever been associated with tracking in any way, other than to rail against it.¹

In *Keeping Track* Jeannie Oakes takes the same data that were available to Goodlad for *A Place Called School* and adds even more dire information. In addition to considerably more verbiage, Oakes adds a historical perspective and develops the possibility that tracking is a conscious, deliberate conspiracy on the part of the capitalistic bourgeois elements in society. Oakes claims these groups seek to protect their privileges and property by providing low-level educational programs for the less advantaged to keep them content with their menial roles in society.²

Goodlad and Oakes muster enough data and emotion so that it is difficult to dispute them. But with a little reflection, something seems amiss in the pictures of tracking that they present. Somehow, one is reminded of a poem by Issa that goes something like this:

The world is a drop of dew,
And yet—and yet . . .

They are stating the obvious, and one hesitates to dispute them, and yet there still seems to be more to the issue.

Despite the criticism of tracking, ability-grouping is a common, even universal characteristic of public education. Others who have studied the issue indicate that it was being practiced at least as early as the turn of the century and that today it is established in "thousands of American schools."³ Some observers even say that the history of education is the history of tracking. Tracking was born the first time an enterprising young teacher in a one-room schoolhouse in the 1800s divided his or her class into those who knew how to read and those who didn't. Certainly it began when teachers started organizing their students into grade- and age-level groups, a clear indication that some students were going to cover different content or the same content at a different rate.



Exemplifying the appropriate match between learner and instructional environment, a chemistry teacher assists students in their work with a spectrophotometer, a device that allows students to identify molecular structure using infrared light.

Reasons for Tracking

As education has become more complex, content more broad, and students more heterogeneous, tracking has increased. In recent years guidelines for certain federal funds—special and gifted education, Chapter 1—require that students be grouped for the purpose of different specialized instruction.

Oakes argues that tradition is one of the main reasons for the existence of tracking. And certainly this historical sorting of students into groups was done for one of the reasons that Oakes gives for tracking today: homogeneous groups are easier to teach.

A variety of additional reasons explain why tracking has become a tradition. It is one method of trying to improve the instructional setting for selected students, or what one researcher refers to as a "search for a better match between learner and instructional environment."⁴ Tracking becomes a very common way of attempting to provide for individual differences. Unless everyone is going to be taught everything simultaneously, grouping is necessary. It may be as simple and obvious as putting some students in grade three and other students in grade four, or some students into a primer and others into a novel.

Tracking is not an attempt to create differences, but to accommodate them. Not all differences are created by the schools; most differences are inherited. In reading Goodlad, and

particularly Oakes, one can get the impression that all students come to school with exactly the same kinds of abilities, aptitudes, and interests. The reality, of course, is that students vary widely. Socioeconomic status does account for differences in students. Learning disabilities may make some students less able to learn than others, and even though educators seldom deal publicly with the fact, some students are more able learners than others. Some students, for whatever reasons, are just plain smarter than others. Other students come to school with a broader and deeper range of experiences, with attitudes that foster learning, and with a positive orientation to school, rather than a neutral or a negative one. The schools did not create these differences, but the schools must accommodate them, and one way is through grouping students according to their needs and abilities. Even Oakes seems to recognize this.

Schools must concentrate on equalizing the day-to-day educational experiences for all students. This implies altering the structures and contents of schools that seem to accord greater benefits to some groups of students than to others.⁵

Equalizing Educational Opportunity

But how are educational experiences made equal? It is easy to argue that putting all students in the same classes is not going to equalize their expectations. In fact, an approach that treats all students the same and ignores the real

differences among them can guarantee unequal experiences for all. Treating all students the same is not a formula for equity or excellence.

Indeed, research supports tracking. A meta-analysis of 52 studies of secondary tracking programs found "only trivial effects on the achievement of average and below average students." The researchers added that "this finding ... does not support the view of other recent reviewers who claim that grouping has unfavorable effects on the achievement of low-aptitude students. The effect is near zero on the achievement of average and below-average students; it is not negative."⁶

Despite the zero effect on achievement of average and below-average students, these studies did show some benefits for tracking.

The controlled studies that we examined gave a very different picture of the effects of grouping on student attitudes. Students seemed to like their school subjects more when they studied them with peers of similar ability, and some students in grouped classes even developed more positive attitudes about themselves and about school.⁷

Tracking is more than a tradition. In a balanced view of tracking, the issue becomes not whether tracking is good or bad, but whether any particular example of tracking accomplishes the goal of matching the learner to the instructional environment.

Appropriate Tracking

If there is such a thing as good and bad tracking, how does one tell the difference? Can we establish objective criteria? Obviously no magic formulas exist, but *Keeping Track* provides a basis for distinguishing between good and bad tracking.

Oakes cites the decision in the court case of *Hobson v. Hansen*, and calls it "the best known and probably still the most important rule on tracking."⁸ The court's decision stated that tracking is inappropriate and unlawful when it limits educational opportunities for certain students "on the assumption that they are capable of no more." The court also provided a definition of appropriate tracking.

Any system of ability grouping which, through a failure to include and implement the concept of compensatory education for the disadvantaged child or otherwise fails in fact to bring the great majority of children into the mainstream of public education denies the children educated

"Treating all students the same is not a formula for equity or excellence."

equal opportunity and thus encounters the constitutional bar.⁹

This decision suggests the characteristics of appropriate tracking. One obvious consideration is content. Oakes uses the term "high-status knowledge" which she defines initially as "a commodity whose distribution is limited" to enhance its value. But it is also defined as the knowledge that "provides access to the university."¹⁰ For the purposes of this discussion, high-status knowledge can be thought of as the combination of skills, experiences, attitudes, and academic content needed to create an informed and productive member of society. At the risk of using a cliché: it is the idea that knowledge is power, and that the primary function of the schools is to empower students.

Goodlad and Oakes express legitimate concern that students in the lower tracks are denied access to high-status knowledge, increasing the gap between lower- and higher-tracked (or nontracked) students. Tracking is not appropriate when the intent is to provide the lower-track student with an alternative curriculum that does not lead to the high-status knowledge. An appropriate program of tracking has the same expectations for all students and uses low-level tracking only to provide remediation and to upgrade selected students.

Another consideration, not directly addressed by the court but implicit in the decision, relates to the quality of instruction. Goodlad and Oakes apparently never observed good instruction in a lower-level tracked class, and they seem to assume that quality instruction in a lower track is not possible.

It is true that the attitudes, behaviors, and abilities of the students make lower-track classes more difficult to

teach. But these conditions do not magically improve when the students are scattered among untracked classes. They only become hidden from view and easier to ignore. Appropriate tracking is an attempt to structure situations in which the students' special needs and abilities can be recognized and considered. It enables students in lower-level tracks to move toward the worthwhile goal of achieving high-status knowledge.

Appropriate tracking, then, can provide the best possible match between the learner and the instructional environment. Teachers using it can build a good instructional climate and motivate students toward attaining high-status knowledge.

Inappropriate tracking assumes that low-track students are not capable of acquiring high-status knowledge, and they must be given something less.

Oakes points out that the judge in the *Hobson v. Hansen* decision felt he was making an educational decision that would have been better left to educators. The court's decision concluded, "It is regrettable, of course, that in deciding this case, the court must act in an area so alien to its expertise."¹¹ But alien or not, the court's decision against limiting educational opportunities for some provides the essential basis for distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate tracking. □

1. John I. Goodlad, *A Place Called School* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983), see esp. pp. 155-57.

2. Jeannie Oakes, *Keeping Track, How School Structure Inequality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), see esp. pp. 191-213.

3. Chen-Lin C. Kulik and James A. Kulik, "Effects of Ability Grouping on Secondary School Students: A Meta-Analysis of Evaluation Findings," *American Educational Research Journal* (Fall 1982): 416.

4. Deborah Burnett Strather, "Adopting Instruction to Individual Needs: An Eclectic Approach," *Phi Delta Kappan* (December 1985): 309.

5. Oakes, p. 205.

6. Kulik, p. 426.

7. Kulik, p. 426.

8. Oakes, p. 184.

9. Oakes, p. 184.

10. Oakes, pp. 199-200.

11. Oakes, p. 190.

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