Academic Tracking: A Contradiction to Proficiency for All

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Author Note

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Table 1
Abbreviated Review of Tracking Literature in U. S.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Basis for Grouping Practices/Policies</th>
<th>Study Design</th>
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<th>Methodology of Data Analysis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abu El-Haj &amp; Rubin (2009)</td>
<td>Group students according to perceived ability for the ease of instruction. Thereby making it easier for teachers to target instruction for the needs of students.</td>
<td>Grounded Theory</td>
<td>Analyze the nature and sources of tensions and dilemmas felt by teachers in intentionally heterogeneous settings as a result of detracked &amp; inclusion classrooms</td>
<td>Wrote reflective notes during data collection referring to key points evident in the data during all stages of data collection. Established relationship codes and categories which were compared to key issues identified by teachers</td>
<td>Found that although most teachers were supportive of inclusion and detracking in theory. Teachers struggled with the implementation of these policies. The need for teacher preparation programs to provide the tools to support teachers growth and development in reframing perspective based on social and economic factors.</td>
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<td>Akos, Lambie, Milsom, &amp; Gilbert (2007)</td>
<td>Separating students base do perceived ability, perceived motivation, and/or past academic achievement, and placing them in settings with peers of similar ability and achievement creates a more</td>
<td>Correlational</td>
<td>Is there a relationship between student high school curriculum track choices and specific school factors: GPA, school behavior, attendance, ability classification, ESL and demographic factors: race, gender, SES?</td>
<td>4 x 3 MANOVA chi-square analysis</td>
<td>Data revealed that students should leave high school with the skills necessary for postsecondary school. However, gaps in educational aspirations are evident in relation to school and demographic variables.</td>
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<td>Burris, Wiley, Welner, &amp; Murphy (2008)</td>
<td>Detracking was implementing to achieve the local administration goal: “By the year 2000, 75% of all graduates would earn a NY State Regents diploma, in addition to a local diploma.”</td>
<td>Quasi-experimental</td>
<td>Purpose: Compare pre- and post-reform success at earning NY State Regents diploma vs. IB diploma.</td>
<td>Meta-analysis: Longitudinal, binary logistic regression analysis Examined demographic and achievement data for six cohorts of students</td>
<td>Member of detracked cohort was associated w/increase of ~70% in the odds of IB diploma attainment &amp; &gt; 70% increase in odds of Regents diploma attainment –from a 3X increase for White &amp; Asian 5X increase for A.A. or Latino eligible to receive free/reduced to a 26X increase for A.A. &amp; Latino NOT eligible for free/reduced lunch.</td>
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<td>Buttaro, Catsamis, Mulkey, &amp; Steelman (2010)</td>
<td>Examined within analysis.</td>
<td>Comparative</td>
<td>Is there a difference between schools with a high proportion of minority and those serving mainly White students in relation to the use of ability grouping? Do structural aspects of the school prompt within-class ability grouping? To what extent do</td>
<td>Univariate Analysis Ordinary least squares Multivariate analysis HLM – analysis of frequency</td>
<td>Ability grouping practices are an organizational response to addressing the instructional needs of students with differing skill levels Persistent relationship between cultural and political factors and subsequent track placement had a disproportionate effect along lines of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic status</td>
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<td>Carbonaro (2005)</td>
<td>Tracking serves the purpose of providing students with learning opportunities based on the amount of effort a student displays.</td>
<td>Correlational</td>
<td>political factors contribute to grouping to secure advantages for those with political power? To what extent is within-class grouping in kindergarten associated with gains in average kindergarten test scores?</td>
<td>Ordinary least-squares regression Item-response theory</td>
<td>A student’s track determines the degree of effort the student exerts. Effort across tracks is explained by differences in prior effort and track achievement, however student experiences within track contribute to differences in effort as well. As a predictor of achievement, effort is important but does not account for track effect on gains in achievement. Effect of effort in achievement gains does not vary by track.</td>
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## ACADEMIC TRACKING: A CONTRADICTION

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<td>Gamoran (1990)</td>
<td>The tracking framework provides a tool for school to remediate and accelerate students according to academic needs, when students are provided with active engagement in the process.</td>
<td>Correlational</td>
<td>Track effects differ according to certain structural characteristics of stratification systems, which vary across schools Effects of tracking are not the same in Catholic schools as public schools (Gamoran &amp; Berends, 1987)</td>
<td>Hierarchical Linear Modeling - Three DVs in math, reading, &amp; vocabulary achievement Tracking and achievement in a national sample of high schools</td>
<td>Tracking models within Catholic schools produce lower levels of inequality through use of flexible and moderately inclusive systems. Examining the dimension of selectivity, electivity, inclusiveness, and scope, this study suggested student achievement is not constant across schools, which can be partially attributed to a perceived availability of choice in tracking decisions.</td>
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<td>Kelly &amp; Price (2011)</td>
<td>Instruction will be better tailored to students' needs in high and low tracks and students in both tracks will experience rapid achievement growth.</td>
<td>Correlational</td>
<td>How do high school tracking systems correlate with one another? How have tracking policies change over a 10-year period?</td>
<td>Ordinary least-squares regression</td>
<td>Tracking is implicit and the only question is how the student will be placed. The end or modification of tracking lies in the policies and specific practices between- and within-school systems.</td>
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<td>Hallihan (1994)</td>
<td>Basis for track assignment varies by the school differences in track structure, assignment criteria and flexibility, and scheduling priorities.</td>
<td>Comparative</td>
<td>Do schools differ in the likelihood that a student is assigned to a given track? Do schools provide different opportunities for learning to students assigned to the same track?</td>
<td>Multiple Regression Analysis Multivariate - Inferential analyses - (ordered probit model) factors affecting track placement</td>
<td>Highlights the ways that tracking may provide differential opportunities to learn through modification of tracking policies and practices to decrease earlier inequities.</td>
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<td>McPherson (2010)</td>
<td>Intended to provide better opportunities and flexibility with track movement based on improved academic performance on tests.</td>
<td>Grounded Theory - Systematic analysis of Critical Race Theory &amp; major Federal cases</td>
<td>Purpose: To examine Federal court’s role in perpetuating school tracking practices, which the author argues continue to have a disproportionately negative impact on educational opportunity for minority populations in U. S. urban public schools.</td>
<td>Systematic search of literature related to CRT from bibliographic search of Dixson &amp; Rousseau (2006) Systematic search of literature related to tracking with a focus on minority and low-income students</td>
<td>Detracking through court order has a negative impact on access to equitable schooling for students of color. Pursuing more equitable opportunities to learn begins at the within-school level through building-level attitude shifts, and access to high quality teachers, and educational resources</td>
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<td>Mickelson &amp; Everett (2008)</td>
<td>To align course of study framework with high-stakes accountability program</td>
<td>Comparative</td>
<td>What is the relationship between district and school demographics, students’ racial backgrounds, and course of study (COS) assignments? Do between- and within-school variations in COS placements result in greater of less race and social class stratification in opportunities to learn?</td>
<td>Bivariate analysis of variance</td>
<td>Between- and within-school stratification of the COS enrollment reflects the national and state patterns in racial composition where racial and ethnic minorities are disproportionately represented in the career prep or college tech prep COS. Likewise, white or Asian students are less likely to be enrolled in the above COS and more likely to be enrolled in the college/university prep COS. The COS framework, subject area tracking and variations in school quality (associated with concentrated poverty) reproduced race and social class stratification opportunities to learn. This phenomenon is termed ‘Neotracking’.</td>
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<td>Oakes (1992)</td>
<td>Mixed methods</td>
<td>Purpose: To understand the rationale and processes which underlie course offerings students’ course decisions and draws on implications for the reform of vocational education.</td>
<td>Logistical analysis of demographic data, contributing factors Analysis of transcripts</td>
<td>Schools efforts at reform are more beneficial when aimed at integrating academic and vocational education.</td>
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<td>Yonezawa &amp; Jones</td>
<td>Policies and practices in place are beneficial to all students however higher tracks are more desirable.</td>
<td>Qualitative - interview/ conversations</td>
<td>How do students view tracking practices and equity-minded practices to detrack their schools?</td>
<td>Interview/Conversations</td>
<td>Students hold adults, parents, teachers, and principals accountable for practices and policies in place within schools including tracking decisions and placement.</td>
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References


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* Indicates pertinent literature not referenced in table.
Academic Tracking: A Contradiction to Proficiency for All

Historically academic tracking, has disproportionately affected children from impoverished backgrounds. Evidence of academic tracking in Europe to accommodate the children of unskilled workers in to the school system perpetuated the division of social classes in Europe. Subsequent adoption of these tracking principles in the United States, served the similar purpose of accommodating immigrants in the public school system. The result of academic tracking has led to a systematic division within the U.S. public school system, based primarily on race and ethnicity. The U. S. public school system has since developed a long and infamous history for producing results in our educational system that consistently produces poor outcomes for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds as well as students of color and new immigrants.

Coupled with the legislative lack of understanding of the realities of school business, the unfortunate product has become a struggle to meet the challenges without necessary supports, such as funding. One result of this struggle has been the radical swing of the educational pendulum from extreme to extreme or fad to fad in terms of instructional practice. One instructional practice of concern is the use, or misuse of student groups and grouping practices. “One clear artifact of these lesser expectations is the continued use of tracking, also known as ability grouping, which denies many students access to excellent curriculum and teaching (Oakes & Rogers, 2006, p. 333).” The development of standards based education and an emphasis on accountability, educators and administrators have struggled to accommodate all students needs given the incredible pressure of high-stakes testing, another extreme pendulum swing. Efforts to reach proficiency targets resulted in a return to a grouping practice often referred to as tracking, or ability grouping. Academic tracking has been in place since the early 1900’s, with school placing students in specific classes based on their perceived academic ability (Goff, 1995; Kliebard, 2004; Oakes & Rogers, 2006). Tracking, sorting and grouping students for instruction by perceived ability, is a long-standing practice in U.S. schools (Abu El-Haj, 2009). Historically, the basis for educational access has relied on socioeconomic status within society. Academic tracking has its roots in the idea of the average citizen or normalcy, which originated in Europe to divide or sort students into educational groups based on a family’s socioeconomic or social status (Deschens, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001). This practice was informally adopted within the United States to accommodate the large influxes of immigrants in the early 19th century. Higher academic tracks, for the most part, were reserved for those who were citizens of the U.S. who were expected to or considered to be more likely to attend higher education. While lower academic tracks were reserved for those who expected to work in a trade or service industry, which would require less education and certainly did not necessitate higher education.
In an ethnographic study, Abu El-Haj and Rubin (2009) found teachers often referred to some students as having “low ability” and therefore in need of testing and classification for special education services. The teachers involved in this study often, “sought to categorize students who struggled, but who were not identified as special education students” (Abu El-Haj & Rubin, 2009, p. 241). Teachers often wrestle with the relationship between children with disabilities and those they viewed as of low ability. Teachers in this comparative study likewise, were frustrated over how to teach the wide variability of skills, knowledge, and learning styles which were represented by the students in their inclusion and detracked classroom settings (Abu El-Haj & Rubin, 2009). Student achievement and those attributes that contribute to variation in achievement amongst students have been researched; as a result, there has not been any researcher able to attribute any “less than two-thirds of the variation in achievement among schools to the family characteristics of their students,” (Rothstein, 2004, p.14). These researchers have discussed the association between economic disadvantage and student achievement for nearly fifty years (Bowles, Gintis, & Groves, 2005). Driven by the extensive federal mandates of educational reform efforts such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), schools, districts, and states have been striving to meet challenges thrust upon them to change implementation practices and to improve the education system and provide for more inclusive practices for the purpose of ensuring all students receive equal access and opportunity. Kauffman and Hallihan (2011) clearly outlined reform efforts beginning with Johnson’s Great Society of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) and the Education of All Handicapped Children’s Act of 1975 (EAHCA) in terms of being in alignment with the Civil Rights Act of 1974. The common accord among these federal legislative efforts was that they were aimed at underachievement, which was seen as indicator of unequal access (Kauffman & Hallihan, 2011; Abu El-Haj & Rubin, 2009). Unequal access has served as an impetus for multiple reform efforts to understand and explain underachievement of certain students groups in the U.S. public schools system. Another factor contributing to underachievement is opportunity to experience subject area academic content. Whether it is through unintentional means or strategically implemented, access and opportunity provide a key policy and systemic indicator of educational effectiveness. Opportunity is important for the purpose of providing contextualization and simultaneous indicators for attainment. Desimone and Long (2010) point out that “a country’s educational system through national or regional policy can only distribute opportunities-chances to learn and train and guide teachers in further shaping these opportunities and seeking active engagement of children,” (p. 327). Most often teachers who attend higher ranked colleges, score superior on standardized tests and generate greater gains in student achievement (Rowan, Correnti, & Miller, 2002). However, these teachers are less likely to teach low-SES, Black, or Hispanic students (Rowan et al., 2002). Goldhaber and Brewer (2000) and Ingersoll (2002) have produced research indicating that students from low-income homes are more likely to be taught by inexperienced teachers, uncertified teachers, and teachers who may not have a degree in the content area for which they are assigned to teach. Other research suggests additional negative impacts on high-poverty students due to teachers who are more likely to have teachers that rely on basic/procedural instruction instead of conceptual/higher order instruction (Desimone, Smith, & Frisvold, 2007; Gamoran, 1986; Smith, Desimone, & Ueno, 2005), despite ample evidence that these high-poverty students do not necessarily have lower conceptual achievement than procedural achievement (Desimone, Smith, Hayes, & Frisvold, 2005).
Historical evidence indicates that implementation can be related to teachers’ beliefs that providing appropriate instruction is easier when less variation exists in the ability levels of students within the class. The arbitrary exclusion of students with disabilities from access to educational opportunities evolved into a national “civil rights issue as well” (Kauffman & Hallihan, 2011, p. 12). To those involved in the long struggle to break down barriers impeding access to education, the alignment of these two issues is definitively founded. Barriers run along the lines of socioeconomic, racial, and political constructs, which are congruent to the construct of the barrier of ability as well. The federal mandates, unfortunately, have produced a mixed result for those whom they were intended to help. The reasons for the mixed results stems from a lack of federal funding as a part of the mandates and a lack of knowledge and often unwillingness on the part of educators and administrators at all levels.

Proponents of tracking argue that ability-driven tracks make it easier to target instruction appropriately for students’ varying needs (Hallinan, 1994). The tenets of immigration law in the early 1900’s provided scientific justification for the spread of educational tracking and the limiting of educational opportunities for entire segments of the school-age population (Baker, 2002; Oakes, 1985). In the 1980s, researchers began questioning whether academic tracking practices were fair or effective. Oakes & Rogers (2006), repeatedly showed that tracking weakens achievement and produces racial and socioeconomic stratification in schools (Braddock & Dawkins, 1993; Gamoran, 1992; Lipman, 1998). Inclusion and detracking are similar equity-minded practices which share a rationale similar to tracking; sorting students on the basis of “ability” creates inequitable access to education and diverse populations offer more opportunities for equity. Research on tracking with the public school system indicates that high-track classes bring students an academic benefit while low-track classes are associated with lower subsequent achievement (Burris, Wiley, Welner, & Murphy, 2008). NCLB proponents assert the practice of school accountability through legislative acts serves as a change agent for variations in instruction, expectations and educational content and will result in increased academic performance (Berger, 2000; Natriello & Pallas, 2001). Policymakers and educators “appear to share the basic principles of rigor and achievement,” (Burris et al., p. 573) however, to produce the results of proficiency for all students, a reliance on tracking has ensued.

This on-going, comprehensive review examines the history of academic tracking, also known as ability grouping, in the U.S. public schools. The inspection of tracking and grouping methods means produces varied “reasons” for its continued persistence despite reform efforts. An examination of the current system and its framework, which perpetuates a stratified system of access to educational opportunity and lifelong economic outcomes, produces a candid look at the contradiction between reform efforts and the reality of the U.S. education system.

References


