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The Problem with Tracking in Secondary Schools

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Abstract

Tracking, or leveling, is the practice of grouping students based on their academic ability. Studies have shown that students from minority groups and lower economic status are disproportionately represented in lower-level classes. There are several problems associated with the practice of tracking, such as schools not having clearly defined criteria for placement, and lack of advancement and reduced chances for long-term success for students initially placed in lower-level classes. With many districts detracking, it is important to study how they deal with the problems that arise when students who were previously considered low-level are given a more rigorous curriculum.   Included with the literature review is a sample report that can be used by educators as a guide when considering detracking.

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Introduction

Brewer, Rees, and Argys (1995) defined tracking, or leveling, as grouping students according to their academic ability; this method has long been used as a way to organize students and establish educational curriculum. The problem with tracking students is that minority students and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are disproportionately represented in lower level classes (Mallery, J.L., & Mallery, J. G., 1999). This appears to be an issue because being placed in lower-level classes may limit the students' access to higher level education, and result in jeopardizing the goal of equal education for all students. Students' chances for long term success may increase if they are given access to equal educational opportunities (Burris & Welner, 1995).

Studies, such as one done by Jomills Braddock in 1990, have shown that racial and ethnic minorities are disproportionately distributed in both lower-tracked classes and higher-tracked classes, with African-American and Latino students overrepresented in the lower level classes, and White and Asian students vastly overrepresented in the high groupings (Mallery, J.L., & Mallery, J. G., 1999). Analysis done by Brewer, et al. (1995) showed that an effect of tracking - when students were placed in an upper-track - was an increase in student scores, while placement in a lower-track was associated with a decrease in student scores. Brewer et al. (1995) also pointed out that studies in this area are problematic because of the external variables involved, such as external factors like community and family. In their article "Detracking America's Schools: the reform without the cost?" the authors discuss the problem with many of the

studies that have been done regarding detracking. They state that the results may be considered unreliable because evidence suggests that lower tracked classes tend to be given to less experienced teachers and tend to receive fewer resources (Brewer, et al., 1995).

Another issue that may arise is the lack of a defined process for student placement. Grossman and Ancess (2004) point out that students are often placed in lower-level classes due to preconceived ideas regarding their abilities, rather than actual academic factors. In some cases, this placement is simply the choice of the student. Other factors, such as classroom behavior or sibling performance, may play a part in a student's class assignment resulting in an inappropriate academic placement. Due to possibly arbitrary placement, combined with low test scores, educators are considering detracking as a means to increase equality for all students. Some educators see this as a step in the right direction, while others worry about the effect on students whose abilities may not meet the demands of higher-level instruction (Mickelson, 2005).

An initial review of the literature regarding this subject raised numerous issues. The literature seemed to be divided into specific sub-topics, such as the effect of tracking on standardized test results, the concern that tracking tends to lead to segregation, and the need for academic support when undertaking the process of detracking, particularly when eliminating low-level classes. In conducting the research, the first issue addressed was the idea that tracking leads to a form of segregation. In order to determine if this problem was truly

relevant the first research question was posed: What are the guidelines for placement in the specified class level?

After evaluation of the pertinent literature regarding how students are placed, the next step was to explore how students move among different educational levels. Research conducted by Archibald and Keleher (2008) helped to address the second research question: What is the percentage of students who advance beyond their original placement? Analysis of the literature on inter-track mobility led to the final research question: What are the educational practices that promote advancement for students originally given lower placement? After reviewing, this topic and the articles written by authors such as Grossman and Ancess (2004), and Oakes and Wells (1998), it became clear that in order to bring equality in education to all students that detracking needs to take place, and the proper support measures need be implemented to make the transition.

<div align="center">Literature review</div>

What are the guidelines for placement in the specified class level?

Research by Archibald and Keleher (2008), shows that in many cases there are no set criteria for determining class level placement in secondary schools. Often, by the time the students reach middle or high school, they have already been tracked as low-level students and their courses are predetermined with little room for advancement. In many cases, high school students are determining their own placement and are basing their decisions on their

perceived level of ability, not on actual proven ability (Grossman & Ancess, 2004).

In their article "Narrowing the Gap in Affluent Schools," Grossman and Ancess (2004) studied the disparity in education for minority students and White students in historically high performing suburban districts. The authors believed that the gap between these groups of students was not limited to urban settings and sought to discover why this was happening. The districts in New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania, that Grossman and Ancess (2004) studied were all located in affluent suburbs. The authors addressed this issue by conducting student interviews to determine why minority students were underrepresented in higher-level courses. The authors discovered from student interviews that "a key barrier to Black and Latino students' math achievement was teachers' early labeling of many minority students -- as well as students' self-labeling – as weak in math" (p. 72). Grossman and Ancess (2004) found that these ethnic groups were also not as likely to be selected for accelerated math classes, at all grade levels, and there was not a clearly defined process for placement, instead assignment was more often based on teacher judgment.

Student placement in lower-level classes is difficult to regulate, but placement is not the only class level issue. Mallery, J.L. and Mallery, J.G. (1999), citing a 1995 study by Oakes, relate that the screening process for gifted programs tends to be arbitrary and students are generally selected for testing by teachers. The authors state that parental request is also a factor in gifted testing, but that African-American and Latino parents do not have access to this

information, and as a result are not as likely to advocate for their children.

Mallery, J.L. and Mallery, J.G. point out that entrance into the higher level of

classes is often based on teacher or parental request, not always on actual

classroom performance or test results. As related by Atkins and Ellsesser (2003)

a teacher interviewed by the authors stated, "Vocal parents insist that their

children be placed in the top class, whereas poorer parents who have no voice

cannot get their children in classes where they belong" (p. 46). With the reported

inconsistencies in criteria for placement, student placement becomes a variable

that is difficult to predict.

Comprehensive evaluation by Archibald and Keleher (2008) showed that

variation in placement is inevitable when placement decisions are based on

multiple criteria. As the authors discussed there is often a great deal of variation

in the placement process.

Variation is inevitable because decisions are made for hundreds of

students and for hundreds of courses. The decision makers also vary.

Teachers' recommendations are largely decisive, but parents and

guidance counselors are also involved in varying ways; moreover there is

inevitable subjectivity in these placement decisions. In consequence, there

is inconsistency and variability in outcomes for students (p. 35).

This variation is what may lead to improper placement for students, thus

diminishing their opportunities. When decisions are made carelessly or with little

regard for standardized criteria, a student's placement may end up having little to

do with actual ability or potential achievement level.

When established criteria are in place for determining class level, the results can be beneficial to students. Atkins and Ellsesser (2003) recount stories of tracking gathered from schools throughout the country. One educator related that despite her initial resistance to tracking, when the grouping was done with close monitoring the teachers were able to see the benefit for their 9th grade English students. The teachers established specific criteria used for placement which included grades, standardized test scores, work habits, writing abilities, and general attitudes. The criteria were a combination of measurable results and teacher observation. The determinations for placement were made by a group of teachers to ensure a more unbiased placement. By working together the teachers were able to make the student placements as accurately as possible. The teachers also agreed that no student was locked into a level, and a student could be moved at any time that s/he met the criteria for the next level. The results for the students were measurable and showed how leveling could be beneficial if done in a monitored environment with the ability for movement assured when warranted (Atkins & Elsesser, 2003).

What is the percentage of students who advance beyond their original placement?

One of the biggest problems with tracking in secondary education is that a student's potential for success may be limited if they are tracked into a low-level class at an early age and are never given the chance to advance. Schools need to be open to inter-track mobility, according to Archibald and Keleher (2008). "If there is no inter-track mobility, it means that every student starting out in 9th

grade stays in the same level all the way through high school. That is tracking in its most rigid form" (p. 33).

Tracking a student into a low-level course at an early age may be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Students in a low-level course are given a less rigorous curriculum thereby limiting their ability to succeed at a higher level (Martinez & Klopott, 2002). Mickelson (2005) cited a 2000 report by Oakes, Muir, and Joseph when making the assertion that "rudimentary curriculum in low-track classes frequently locks students in low-track levels because they are not exposed to the prerequisite knowledge required for transfer into the higher levels" (p. 56). Mallery, J.L. and Mallery, J.G. (1999) also noted that students are more likely to remain in a set ability level, moving neither up nor down in level, between 7th and 12th grades. This lack of mobility has been shown to have a detrimental effect on a student's long term achievement. Citing several different sources, such as the Children's Defense Fund study of 1988 and the Hammond study of 1995, Mallery, J.L. and Mallery, J.G. (1999) state that students in lower-level courses are more likely to drop out of school prior to graduation and less likely to attend college. Critics of tracking also argue that the psychological effects of tracking also play a part in predestining the low-ranked students for failure (Mallery, J.L., & Mallery, J. G., 1999).

Comprehensive analysis done by Archibald and Keleher (2008) measured inter-track mobility in students from 9th grade English to 10th grade English. The authors gathered data regarding the English class level that 9th grade students enrolled in, standard, college prep, or honors. The following year data was

collected to compare the English enrollment of those same students as they moved on to 10th grade. The authors analyzed the data and found an overall level of mobility of 13%, with 5% of the students moving up in track and 8% of the students moving down (p. 33).

Archibald and Keleher (2008) also broke their data down into subsets to show the mobility rate of specific categories of students. As the researchers in this case found, breaking the data into subsets gives a clearer picture of "course taking patterns and outcomes for students in all pertinent classifications" (p. 35). For example breaking the data into racial categories

> …shows more Black students than White students drop down in course level from 9th to 10th grade. For instance, of the White students in 9th grade Honors English (Eng9-Hon), 22% drop to the College Prep level in 10th grade, while the comparative figure for the Black students is 38%; 78% of White 9th graders in Honors go to 10th grade Honors, while only 62% of Black 9th graders in Honors go to 10th grade Honors English. Overall, a smaller percentage of White than Black students go down in level from 9th to 10th grade (p. 35).

Data such as this is highly relevant to the issue of leveling and the effect that placement has on all students. Ideally, educators would like to see students move up as they progress through secondary school, but as seen in this analysis, that is not the trend that is currently occurring. This leads educators to correctly question the validity of class leveling and search for ways to combat the

detrimental effects being relegated to lower-level classes seems to be having on students' progress (Archibald & Keleher, 2008).

What are the educational practices that promote advancement for students originally given lower placement?

Review of the relevant literature shows that many school districts are seeking reform to help narrow the gap between low-level and high-level students, with a goal of increasing the performance of low-level students without decreasing the performance of high-level students. Martinez and Klopott (2002) discussed the strategies implemented by schools that have been successful at raising the level of education for all students. Opponents of tracking have advocated for widespread elimination of class levels, but detracking without establishing procedures to ease the transition can have detrimental effects. The most important characteristic of school reform, when dealing with detracking, is establishing the necessary programs so that previously low-tracked student can succeed under the new, more rigorous curriculum (Burris & Welner, 2005).

One of the goals of detracking is to increase enrollment in higher-level classes which will ultimately increase the students' chances of continuing on to postsecondary school (Martinez & Klopott, 2002). Grossman and Ancess (2004) studied schools that implemented several programs to support the students transitioning to higher-level courses. One of the schools they studied designed and implemented a math enrichment program for 10th grade minority students. The program targeted students who showed a capacity for high level math, but had not previously enrolled in those classes. The students participated in weekly study groups and were led by a master teacher. The group helped the students

to improve their understanding of key concepts, but did not prepare the students to skip to the higher-level course, so the students said they did not see a positive effect. To remedy that situation, the educators expanded the program and created a summer enrichment program to allow students to enroll in the higher-level math course. (Grossman & Ancess, 2004).

Another strategy that schools have employed in transitioning students to higher-level classes is adding support classes.   One of the schools Oakes and Wells (1998) observed created an intercession to give low-achieving students a chance to repeat a class they had failed without affecting their course load during the regular sessions. Several of the schools also offered resource classes for low-achieving students. These classes took the place of an elective in the student's schedule (Oakes & Wells, 1998). One of the schools in the Grossman and Ancess (2004) study bolstered enrollment in a previously established summer Advanced Placement Academy whose mission was to prepare students for honors and Advanced Placement courses, by actively promoting the program.

Martinez & Klopott (2002) discuss the reform that is necessary to raise enrollment in higher-level courses and increase access to postsecondary education for underserved students, and list the four practices they observed as most commonly attributed to increasing college access and success for traditionally underserved students:

1. Eliminating academic tracking by enrolling all students in college preparatory classes

2. Connecting academic learning to real world (i.e. increasing relevance by emphasizing relevant curriculum)

3. Creating personalized learning environments

4. Providing academic and social support for students (p.15).

The article discusses how schools need to provide strong academic and social support so that previously low-tracked students can complete higher-level course work. These findings were also confirmed by Oakes and Wells (1998) who discussed the progress that they followed in ten secondary schools. The schools they studied reduced or eliminated tracking. In addition, the schools created new schedules, reorganized teachers into teams, provided all students access to honors programs, instituted integrated curriculums, and created opportunities for students to get extra academic support in an effort to make standards-based education possible (Oakes & Wells, 1998).

Burris and Welner (2005) studied the Rockville Centre School District in the state of New York. This district set a goal to increase the number of students earning Regents diplomas, a diploma which requires passing a minimum of eight Regents examinations. The schools began the challenge by replacing all low-track courses with heterogeneously grouped classes with the curriculum formerly reserved for the district's high-track students. The school eased the transition by offering struggling students extra support classes, similar to the schools in the Oakes and Wells (1998) study. The district monitored the results and found that the overall number of Regents diplomas increased, but the number of minority and lower socioeconomic students (SES) receiving the diploma did not. The

district realized that they needed to make further changes, which included changes made at the middle school level. The middle school began to instruct all students in a revised and condensed curriculum and provided extra support for struggling students. After implementing these changes, over 90% of incoming freshman entered high school already having passed the first Regents math exam (Burris & Welner, 2005). Having this accomplishment set the students on a path of greater achievement and greatly increased the number of minority and low SES students receiving the Regents diploma. The teachers realized that "Achievement follows from opportunities – opportunities that tracking denies" (p. 598). The authors found this to be true for all the students in their study, majority, minority, special education, low-SES and high-SES (Burris & Welner, 2005).

Simply eliminating low-track classes and teaching all students equally is not the answer to the problems that are shown to be the result of tracking. Students who have been locked into low-level classes may not have the requisite knowledge or skill set to succeed in the new classes. Schools need to offer extra support measures for students transitioning from low-level to high-level classes, so that they can achieve success in the rigorous new curriculum (Brewer, et al., 1995).

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

As shown in the literature reviewed, tracking in secondary schools has resulted in inequality in education, as minority and SES students are disproportionately represented in low and high-level classes. As discussed in

Mallery, J.L. and Mallery, J.G. (1999) these groups are overrepresented in low-level classes and underrepresented in high-level classes. The research done by Brewer et al. (1995) shows that students in low-track classes have lower scores on standardized tests, are less likely to attend postsecondary institutions, and are more likely to drop out of school before graduating from high school. The overall effect of tracking in secondary schools, as discussed in the literature review, is negative, showing a decrease in standardized test scores for low-level students who also tend to be disproportionally minority, and low-SES students (Grossman & Ancess, 2004; Loveless1999; Mallery, J.L., & Mallery, J. G., 1999).

The research done by Archibald and Keleher (2008) also shows that students are not likely to advance beyond their initial placement. Many students are labeled as low-track early in their educational careers and never move out of that placement regardless of their actual ability to achieve success in a level of higher education. Many of these placements are not based on established criterion, but instead are subjectively based, or more likely in the case of high-track placement, a result of parental input (Archibald & Keleher, 2008; Mallery, J.L., & Mallery, J.G., 1999).

These problems leave schools that continue to track students in need of reform (Burris & Welner, 2005). The reform that must take place is a multi-step process. In order to successfully eradicate the deficits caused by tracking, schools must implement a system of support as previously low-tracked students transition to the more rigorous curriculum previously reserved for the high-track classes. Study sessions, summer academies, and resource classes in the place

of electives are just some of the changes that high schools need to make if they want to successfully eliminate academic tracking (Martinez & Klopott, 2002). School districts must look at the schools that have already achieved a level of success in raising the curriculum for all of their students in order to see what the schools did to achieve success. Working together toward a goal of raising the academic bar for all students will be the only way that successful detracking can occur (Burris & Welner, 2005; Hurley & Tracey, 1996; Oakes & Wells, 1998).

Included as Appendix A is a PowerPoint presentation that is intended to inform educators about the effects of tracking. The presentation highlights the relevant research and results show teachers that tracking can have a negative educational effect.

Appendix B is a report on tracking in secondary schools that can be used by educators as a sample guide when contemplating detracking. The report shows how statistical evidence can be compiled to aide in the decision making process. The report also contains a list of programs and strategies that have been implemented in schools that have successfully integrated their curriculum and achieved a greater level of success for all of their students.

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Appendix A

Appendix B