Tracking: An Educational Opportunity

Tracking has become a very controversial topic in the last three decades. Tracking is defined as "the separation of students into different classrooms, or tracks, based on ability" (Beru et al., 2007). Tracking is often thought of permanent placements without any flexibility for students to move between groups. I believe this implementation decreases motivation and is a bad system for students. Therefore in this paper, tracking refers to flexibility between groups. Opponents argue that tracking makes education unequal for students. It is also argued that students of lower abilities perform worse when they are tracked into the same class or group as other lower-ability students. Proponents often argue that tracking students into groups allows each teacher to better address the needs of his or her students because they are in homogeneous ability groups. Tracking is also argued to be good for the upper level students. One factor to consider is how other countries track their students and what kind of effect this has on student achievement, especially as compared to the United States. Tracking, when implemented correctly, is ultimately beneficial for all students.

An argument against tracking is that it has begun to be thought of as separating students into ability grouping that ultimately makes educational opportunities unequal for students (Woessmann, 2009). This is upsetting because every student deserves a great education that is just as full of opportunities and promise as every other student's education. This statement does not mean the same thing for every student though. Each student deserves a great education but this does not mean that every student deserves the same education (Kohn, 2010). Every student has different interests, abilities, struggles, and needs. Because of these things, it is not justifiable to require all students to take the

same classes or get the same grades. Noddings in *Psychology Applied to Teaching* by Snowman, McCown and Biehler (2012) states that because of these differences in students, "…it is a mistake to hold everyone to the same set of standards" (p. 541). Writing on the same idea, Kohn (2010) asserts, "The problem is that excellence is being confused with entirely different attributes, such as uniformity, rigor, specificity, and victory." In his article, Kohn is addressing standards in America but his arguments also apply to tracking. Standards are meant to make education the same for all students; to ensure that each and every pupil is learning the same basic material. This is the same concept as eliminating tracking in schools. Because different students have different academic needs and strengths, it is nothing less of unfair to require a struggling student to sit through, for example, eleventh grade English, if she needs extra help or to ask a different student to endure the same class if she is bored with the material.

When Kohn (2010) writes, "The problem is that excellence is being confused with…victory," he means victory over other nations. Later in his paper Kohn maintains, "Rather a prescription for uniform, rigorous standards is made to order for those whose chief concern is to pump up the American economy and make sure that we triumph over people who live in other countries." Again, Kohn is writing about the standards of education in America but the same concept applies to tracking. When all students are required to attend the same classes and are not allowed to join ability grouped classes, the same effect that Kohn writes about happens; the focus is on making all education "equal" when it really is not equal at all. When an individual is more advanced than the given material, he suffers under his "equal" education when in fact his peer is struggling to understand the concepts. This is not equality.

Kohn does bring up another interesting point, though: how does the United States compare with other nations? The goal in investigating other countries' educational systems should not be in order to compare ourselves to them and their students, but rather to discover what systems work and what strategies do not. In *Highlights from TIMSS 2007* from the National Center for Educational Statistics the executive summary states:

> At grade four, seven countries had higher percentages of students performing at or above the advanced international mathematics benchmark than the United States: Singapore, Hong Kong SAR, Chinese Taipei, Japan, Kazakhstan, England, and the Russian Federation. Fourth-graders in these seven countries were also found to outperform U.S. fourth-graders, on average, on the overall mathematics scale. At grade eight, a slightly different set of seven countries had higher percentages of students performing at or above the advanced mathematics benchmark than the United States: Chinese Taipei, Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong SAR, Japan, Hungary, and the Russian Federation.

Several of these countries become especially interesting when the report goes on to say:

> At grade four, two countries had higher percentages of students performing at or above the advanced international science benchmark than the United States: Singapore and Chinese Taipei. Fourth-graders in these two countries were also found to outperform U.S. fourth-graders, on average, on the overall science scale. At grade eight, six countries had higher percentages of students performing at or above the advanced science benchmark than the United States: Singapore, Chinese Taipei, Japan, England, Korea, and Hungary. These six countries also had higher average overall eighth-grade science scores than the United States.

Singapore is in every single one of the lists mentioned above. An investigation into the Singaporean education system reveals that "the school system has an emphasis on testing and student tracking. Education is perceived as the key to social mobility and this can lead to high levels of competition and pressure from parents for student achievement" (School Accountability Framework Review, 2006). Students in Singapore are tracked in Primary 6 (similar to grade 6 in the U.S.) into special, normal, or express tracks. Another country seen on three out of four of these lists is Japan. Japan holds entrance exams for high schools which are structured hierarchal (Nakanishi, 2011). A study conducted by Nakanishi (2011) discovered that junior high students were aware of the tracking and actually had preferences on which track they wanted to go into. Based on Nakanishi's study, 34 percent of students set their sights on the "Academic Track," 51 percent preferred the "General Track," and 15 percent of Japanese students desired the "Vocational Track." This study presents the question as to whether United States students would respond in a similar way.

Focusing again on tracking in the United States, many opponents of tracking argue that students in lower tracking levels will perform less well if they are in homogeneous groups and will have lower self-esteem and be less motivated (Beru et al., 2007). Some forms of tracking can ultimately lead to this type of situation but if students are given the opportunity to move up a track if they perform well tracking could actually increase motivation in all levels. Especially if students are given a choice as to what track they want to be placed in and the decision is not solely based on test scores, this could drastically improve motivation across the board. A study done by Figlio and Page (2002)

that addressed these issues found that tracking in these circumstances actually helps students in the lower track. In their study they state:

> We find no evidence that low-ability students are harmed by being grouped together and conclude that the trend away from tracking is misguided. In fact, we find that tracking programs may be associated with test score gains for students in the bottom third of the initial test score distribution. We conclude that the move to end tracking may harm the very students that it is intended to help (p. 499).

Their study goes on to demonstrate that students from all levels who were tracked performed better on a state math test than students who were in heterogeneous groups, especially students who were placed in the high track. Thus, if done correctly, tracking does not harm the low-ability grouped students. It could actually help them because they may experience more motivation and receive an education that is more tailored to their needs, and this is true for all students.

Better addressing student needs is one of the main arguments supporting the use of tracking in schools. Duflo, Dupas and Kremer (2009) conducted a study in Kenya in order to research this point. 140 elementary schools in Kenya received a new teacher to divide up the first grade class into two sections. 61 of these schools tracked their students into high and low-ability groups, the other schools served as the null group. What Duflo, Dupas and Kremer (2009) discovered was that all students benefited from tracking. They determined this effect by examining test scores in math and language and attributed the success to the teacher being better able to tailor classes to students' needs. They discovered that students in tracking schools scored .14 standard deviations higher than students in schools that were not tracked (Duflo, Dupas and Kremer, 2009). Therefore,

when teachers can teach to a homogeneous group of students, they are more able to accommodate for those students' needs and help them learn more.

Tracking students into ability groups is in reality good for the upper level students. Often times when tracking is argued against, the arguments are phrased around the low-ability grouped students. The two main arguments in opposition of tracking are that the system provides unequal education for these low-ability students and that these same students achieve less when they are placed in homogeneous groups. The aspect that these arguments are missing is the high-ability grouped students. It is crucial to consider the potential benefits of tracking for the high-ability students. Beru et al. (2007) cleverly states, "Advocates of tracking… argue that… it is possible to increase the pace and level of instruction for high achievers" (p. 2). These students are the future of this country; the scientists, the doctors, and the engineers. Not to say other students cannot be these things also, but high achieving students are more likely to pursue these careers. Advanced classes can help them reach their goals. One of the goals of education is to allow students to learn as much as they can, but when these high achievers are "held back" in non-tracked classes, they are not allowed to reach their academic potential. They may become bored and frustrated with the pace of non-advanced classes and decide that school is not worth their efforts. Not tracking in schools is doing these students a disservice.

Being one of these high-achieving students myself, I would have been outraged if my school had not allowed tracking. Being in the advanced track got me where I am today: I graduated high school with honors and two years' worth of college completed then continued on to a four-year institution and currently have a 4.0 GPA and will graduate with a double major in three years. Tracking was one of the best functions my

public school offered. Without the opportunity to take college classes while in high school, I would not be able to finish my double major in only three years after graduating. I also would have been very bored in high school. Advanced classes give students like myself the opportunity to learn at a faster pace without some of the interruptions of other classes. Many students in the advanced track are at school to learn and work hard to achieve to the best of their abilities. Advanced classes offer high-performing students motivation opportunities that other classes may not offer. As mentioned earlier, if students in lower tracks are encouraged to work hard to move up tracks, this increases motivation for these students also. Students will understand that hard work leads to higher ability groups and will strive for success. Consequently, tracking is good for all students, especially the high achieving students.

I believe that tracking is beneficial when practiced correctly. This means that students are allowed to move within the tracks and get some say as to what track they wish to be placed in. When implemented properly, tracking allows for equal education for all students that is equally or more motivating and rewarding than non-tracked classes. Students in lower ability groups may actually do better when grouped together. Tracking is motivating for all students and benefits homogeneous ability groups by allowing teachers to customize instruction to fit students' unique needs. In addition to all these things, tracking benefits high-ability grouped students by allowing them to move at a pace that is comfortable for them and to have fewer distractions and more opportunities than they would otherwise receive in general classes. Tracking is therefore highly valuable and very beneficial to all students involved when implemented appropriately.

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