

Running Head: Quality Instruction: Through Tracking?

Providing Quality Instruction in Urban Schools: Through Tracking?

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Abstract

Much of the discourse around education and learning today is focused on ways that teachers can decrease the achievement gap through their instruction. One contributing factor to the widening achievement gap is when students receive inequitable instruction. Inequitable instruction is not requiring that all students receive identical instruction, but refers to the unequal quality of instruction and lack of resources. This capstone seeks to explore the ways in which urban middle and high schools in past and current times have structured schools to deliver effective and quality instruction. Historically in the United States, tracking was seen as the most efficient way of structuring differing levels of students. Students were sorted by academic ability into separate instructional groups in the hopes of meeting students where they are and providing appropriate instruction. As research revealed the inequities perpetuated by tracking, schools were forced to either abandon the practice of tracking or find ways to provide equitable instruction to all students. Whether schools continue the practice of tracking or abandon it, there are several possible solutions that urban school systems can employ to sustain change and quality instruction. These solutions include changing teacher beliefs about students' ability, using culturally relevant pedagogy, and implementing response to intervention. In each of these practices, teachers are asked to set high expectations for their students while providing them with appropriate scaffolding and support to achieve.

Keywords: tracking, ability grouping, quality instruction

People are grouped in almost every area of life. As humans, it is natural to categorize and label things as we use our schema to make sense of the world around us. The creation of most groups can be attributed to the need for efficiency. Since our country is constantly growing in diversity, grouping has become a means to organize the world. Children are grouped separately than adults. Males are grouped with or without females. Speakers of one language are grouped together. Each of these groups has shared abilities, thus making their grouping more efficient.

In an effort to make education more efficient and effective for each learner, students are often grouped according to academic ability (Ansalone, 2001). Those who perform well in a given content are grouped together so that they may move more quickly through or more complexly with the material. Those who perform poorly on a given topic are grouped together for intensive instruction. For example, it is not uncommon for a 7th grade to have a range of math classes from “basic” to Algebra I. Grouping is not a new concept and has been widely debated over the last century (Oakes, 2005; Gamoran, 1989; Hallinan, 1994; Loveless, 2009).

There are two camps when speaking about educational grouping, or tracking; however, I believe that most educators fall somewhere on a continuum between the two extremes. The research of one group shows that this grouping is inequitable and promotes societal inequalities (Farmer & Hinton, 2008; Kelly & Price, 2011; Oakes, 2005; Rose, 1989). Research of the opposing group has found grouping to be more efficient for teachers and beneficial for gifted students (Loveless, 2009; Kelly & Price, 2011). Both sides have expansive arguments as to why tracking does or does not work. According to a review of the past and current literature on the practice of tracking, neither tracking nor detracking has been found to be a completely equitable solution for educating all students. If this is the case, what then are effective practices that teachers in diverse urban classrooms can utilize to educate all of their students? In this paper, I

will explore the affordances and constraints of tracking in urban schools in light of recent studies that show certain types of grouping can be beneficial for all students (Loveless, 2009). I will also address the implications of these findings as a classroom teacher in an urban space. Brief definitions of the terms ability grouping and tracking are provided.

The terms ability grouping and tracking are often used interchangeably. For the purposes of this paper, a slight clarification between the two must be made. Ability grouping means that students are grouped according to ability level and usually takes place within-class (Slavin, 1990). Reading groups are a common example of this type of grouping (see Alvermann, 2001; Franzak, 2008). Tracking occurs when students are grouped between classes. Remedial math, regular algebra, and honors algebra are examples of different groups of ability.

Using the definition of Beth Rubin (2006), tracking is “the sorting and grouping of students for instruction based on an assessment of academic ability.” Within this definition of tracking, I include ability grouping in instances where students have no mobility (Worthy, 2010). I make this distinction because students can be placed in heterogeneous classes (mixed ability) and still be affected negatively by permanent grouping by a number of items such as race, class, or academic ability. If students are placed in the struggling group and are never moved up when ability increases, this can be considered a form of tracking. Flexible ability grouping (Rubin, 2006; Loveless, 2013) differs from this in that students are not assigned to only one static group but have the freedom to change groups depending on current need. In this paper, tracking is a static group while flexible grouping is not. I will discuss the history and changing demographics of schools to provide background and a rationale for a change in structure and instruction in schools.

History of Schooling

With the diversity of schools growing more and more each year, different structures have been employed to help meet the diverse needs. Initially only the elite were able to attend school. Most Americans spent their time working in agriculture or factories. Changes in child labor laws afforded more children the opportunity to attend school. Between 1880 and 1918, the population of students grew from 200,000 to over 1.5 million (Resnick & Resnick, 1985; Oakes, 2005). With these changes, people from different cultures and needs began to be educated together. As Americans had recently become interested in the idea of industrial efficiency, the practice was also applied to schools (Oakes, 2005). Administrators saw the division of curriculum and the sorting of students to be the most efficient means of educating the new diverse and growing population in schools.

Additionally, education reflects the needs of the labor market (Kelly & Price, 2011). Vocational education grew in popularity as needs for clerical and technological jobs expanded (Resnick & Resnick, 1985). Scheduling limited students' ability to take both vocational and university courses. Students then began to be tracked accordingly (Resnick & Resnick, 1985). Those who were tracked into the vocational courses were usually poor or minority students (Hammer, 1983). Schools used the theory that these students only had aptitude and interest in vocational work as their rationale for placement (Resnick & Resnick, 1985). As a way to justify the placement of people in tracks, intelligence was used. IQ testing was used for a short time to aid in track placement, but past academic performance became the more popular method (Oakes, 2005). Though this was meant to be a more equitable solution, students with poor academic performance still tended to be students of low socioeconomic status or non-white (Hammer,

1983). Therefore, the same types of students were continually placed in each class, which reflected the structure of society at large. Those who were in the lower tracks were most often the marginalized and lower class.

This practice came under fire in the 1970's and 80's with Jeannie Oakes (2005) study becoming a leading voice against tracking. Though academic performance was used to place students, a majority of students placed in low tracks were poor and minority students. Their placements were only reinforcing the structures of society, which were inequitable. Students were not able to move between tracks. Placement in a the vocational track meant that the student would not take the classes required to get into a university, thereby often sealing the student's life in a lower class. Oakes (2005) study revealed that poor teaching was occurring in these low tracked classes (see also: McLaughlin & Talbert, 2005). The lack of quality instruction led to a growing achievement gap between the high and low tracked students. These inequities will be discussed in more detail in the paper. From these inequities, much of the research in the 1990's called for schools to detrack and many heeded their advice.

The current state of tracking in the United States varies widely. Static tracks have been removed from many secondary schools and vocational schools are often separate institutions. Subjects such as history and science are rarely tracked except for an honors or AP class (Loveless, 2013). The separation of regular from honors students in any class could still be considered tracking depending on the types of instruction given (Worthy, 2010). Tracking is most often found in math classes where the content is thought to be more sequential than in other subjects (Rosenbaum, 1999; Loveless, 2009). So, while some schools still utilize tracking, many schools have moved to completely detrack their schools and offer the same curriculum to all students (Burriss & Welner, 2005; Alvarez & Mehan, 2006; Rubin, 2006). As detracking is a

proposed solution to the tracking problem, it will be discussed in great depth throughout the paper.

Tracking Wars

As stated earlier, there are two opinions about tracking in the research. Proponents of tracking argue that tracking is good for the proficient and gifted students because they are able to do more academically challenging tasks without waiting for the other students. Opponents of tracking have found that students in the lower tracks show little difference in improvement than if they were in heterogeneous classes. Because one group focuses on the achievement of high tracks and the other on the achievement of the low tracks, their conversations often do not meet as they are focused on separate groups (Gamoran, 2009). Both the downfalls and more recently researched benefits of grouping will be discussed with recommendations for current classroom practice to follow.

Arguments For Tracking

There is no doubt that schools in America are more and more diverse each day. School leaders are then forced to ask themselves how they will meet all the needs of their students. With increased accountability measures with No Child Left Behind, a resurgence of tracking has been seen in schools (Loveless, 2013). Leaders felt that placing students in homogenous groups according to academic ability would be the best option. In a homogenous class, teachers are able to focus on instructing one group of students. Instruction is more efficient and effective when teachers are able to match it with students' ability (Slavin, 1990; Hallinan, 1994; Kelly & Price, 2011). For struggling learners, teachers are able to take time fully support those students without worrying that the proficient students will become bored. Different learning speeds could be more appropriately accommodated in tracked classrooms as teachers could provide more or less

support for each type of student (Oakes, 2005; Slavin, 1990). The majority of supporters of tracking favor it because it benefits gifted learners.

Research has also shown that gifted learners do not perform as well in heterogeneous classes as they do in tracked classrooms (Gamoran, 2009; Loveless, 2009). While the gap between struggling and gifted learners decreased in heterogeneous classes, fewer students scored advanced in these classes than in tracked classrooms. Detracking classes promotes equity in the lower tracks, but it occurs at the expense of achievement in the higher tracks (Argys, Rees, & Brewer 1996; Ansalone, 2001; Loveless, 2009). Some of the most vocal supporters of tracking are the parents of talented and gifted students (Loveless, 2009; Kelly & Price, 2011). These parents recognize the importance of having advanced classes so that their children can operate at their full academic potential. Fear of being negatively influenced by struggling students also gives them reason to fight detracking policies (Loveless, 2013).

Tracking has potential to be an effective practice if instruction is quality and students' needs are met. High standards and accountability in the lower tracks could increase their effectiveness (Gamoran, 2009). Additional resources and support can also aid teachers in their efforts to teach different abilities of students (Hallinan, 1994). While the intentions of tracking are noble, most often the negative results outweigh the intended good.

Arguments Against Tracking

Tracking may benefit the top learners, but it can be detrimental to the struggling learners. Track assignment generally and unfortunately correlates with social status (Oakes, 2005). Therefore, those who are the lowest in society are the one placed in the lowest tracks. Thus, it perpetuates societal inequities though education is supposed to be a source of liberation (Rose, 1989; Oakes, 2005, Slavin, 1990). While there is increased mobility among tracks in current

times, students who are placed in the lowest tracks rarely are able to make the move to higher tracks (Worthy, 2010). Students lack the knowledge and skills to be successful in higher tracks because the lowest tracks receive the least effective instruction (Slavin, 1990).

In a study by Jo Worthy (2010), she found that teachers had lower expectations and negative attitudes toward their lowest tracked learners. Teachers' lowered expectations and negative attitudes led them to provide poor instruction for their students that would have benefited the most from quality instruction. Students in lower tracks were given lower level thinking tasks because teachers assumed they were unable to perform more complex tasks (Rose, 1989; Worthy, 2010). Much of students' time is spent on behavior modification instead of learning of content (Hallinan, 1994; Worthy, 2010). When content is taught, it is covered at a much slower pace than the higher tracks, which puts students even further behind their peers (Slavin, 1990; Gamoran, 2009).

In addition to poor instruction and lowered expectations, teacher quality is less in lower tracked classes (Slavin, 1990; Argys, Rees, & Brewer, 1996; Gamoran, 2009; Loveless, 2009). Because of the negative perception of lower tracked students, many teachers do not want to teach them. Many teachers saw these students as hopeless, as though anything they taught would be too late (Worthy, 2010). Seniority among teachers gives them the opportunity to choose which classes they want to teach leaving the least desired classes to the new or unqualified teachers. The students who need the best teachers are often the ones who never have them.

Grouping struggling students together has the potential to increase achievement, but these students often fail as a result of the grouping. These students experience lowered expectations, poor instruction, and poor teacher quality. Tracking in these conditions results in increased numbers of absences and dropouts, the opposite of the goal (Gamoran, 1989). Because the

benefits of tracking for gifted students do not outweigh the losses of struggling students, many schools have made the move to begin detracking. Detracking is more commonly found in urban contexts as new school reforms are rolled out every few years (Loveless, 2009).

Detracking

Detracking happens when schools reduce the number of ability-grouped courses (Loveless, 2009). Detracked schools offer all students the same curriculum in heterogeneously grouped classes. Examples of this include offering algebra to all 8th grade students (Loveless, 2009). In this way, all students are exposed to quality curriculum and teaching. In detracked classes, struggling learners can work alongside of and learn from gifted learners (Cone, 2006). As tracking students into separate groups was shown to be inequitable, detracking provided an answer by removing all groups from instruction.

Aside from the aforementioned decrease in gifted learners achievement, other problems with detracking schools exist. In Rosenbaum's study (1999) of Progressive High School, he highlighted obstacles teachers faced when implementing detracking. One of the most difficult obstacles was providing appropriate tasks and pace for all students in the class. Teachers felt that they were doing the struggling learners a disservice by not being able to ensure mastery of content while also keeping the gifted learners engaged. Without additional support and resources, teachers felt that providing quality instruction to all students simultaneously was nearly impossible (Rosenbaum, 1999). An overview of the literature indicates that both tracking and detracking could be positive instructional solutions with proper implementation. Loveless (2009) stated that detracking is more common in urban schools. The equity of tracking or detracking in urban contexts must be questioned as there are high expectations regarding these schools'

success. The affordances and constraints of tracking or grouping in urban contexts will be discussed followed by implications for classroom teachers.

Affordances and Constraints of Tracking in Urban Contexts

The practice of tracking has been found to exacerbate inequities between social classes. Those in higher social class benefit more from the practice of tracking, while those in the lower social class do not. Higher concentrations of minority and low-income students are found in urban schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Because of housing policies, low-income students live together in the same areas, which means they are placed in the same schools (Anyon, 2005). These policies work to reinstate a sense of segregation in many urban schools. For many years, urban schools have been at the forefront of education reform (Payne, 2008). These reforms were put in place to decrease the achievement gap between struggling learners and gifted learners. In order to decrease the achievement gap, the opportunity gap must first be addressed (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Without opportunities, achievement is unlikely to be improved. Issues that influence the opportunity gap in relation to education and schools are access to individualized instruction, appropriate curriculum, quality teachers, and additional educational resources such as museums and books. Traditional tracking as it has been practiced in the past has not proven to be effective in reducing the opportunity gap. Yet, I posit that in some ways the ideal form of tracking has the potential to increase student learning. I will address the ways that tracking can be positive for urban students as well as the ways that the current implementation of tracking has disadvantaged many urban students.

Affordances of Tracking

Though tracking has not been practiced in an equitable manner, it has the potential to empower students through individualized instruction. Not all students learn in the same way or

even at the same speed. One of the premises of tracking is that students are grouped according to ability. Ability grouping is practiced in many classrooms today. In sequential subjects such as math, it is important that students understand certain concepts before moving on to more complex concepts. For students who need additional help or a slower pace of instruction, tracking or flexible ability grouping can be used to provide teachers with fewer students and more focused instruction. According to Hallinan (1994) students would learn more in ideal tracked classes than detracked classes because they are tailored to student needs. With smaller similar ability class sizes, teachers are able to walk students through concepts step by step at an appropriate pace. Students do not have to wait for help until after the teacher addresses the faster learners in the group. Students also may not feel as much pressure to pretend to understand concepts if all students are of the same ability. Similar ability groups also allow teachers to spend more time explaining concepts or in faster groups diving more deeply into concepts. Though it is possible for tracking to afford student learning, the constraints of student learning in the current implementation are far more and outweigh the possible good.

Constraints of Tracking

The ideal form of tracking or ability grouping has the potential to provide students with individualized and appropriate instruction, yet the past and current implementations of the practice have only increased inequity for urban students and put them at a disadvantage. Disadvantaged students are disadvantaged further through tracking when they have poor teachers and instruction as well as lack of access to resources. This cycle of further marginalizing the disadvantaged has been referred to as the Matthew Effect (Stanovich, 1986). Stanovich (1986) used the Matthew Effect to explain the growing gap in reading ability between gifted and struggling readers. Many students labeled as gifted readers came to school with concepts of print

and phonological awareness. They generally have access to more resources outside of the school building, which adds to their background knowledge. These skills give them an advantage when learning reading strategies. Gifted readers are able to decode words faster and retain comprehension while reading. Thus, gifted readers are able to progress more quickly in reading ability because they are able to use their skills to grow (Stanovich, 1986). Readers labeled as struggling or basic often struggle with basic decoding and comprehension skills and therefore are not able to read as fluently. Without the prior experiences or skills, struggling readers are not able to access new school-based experiences or skills as easily. The same is true for students in low tracked classes, in math or English.

As researchers against the practices of tracking have already noted, students in low tracked classes often have lower teacher and instructional quality than their higher tracked peers. This disadvantage is exacerbated in low-income urban schools where teacher quality is already an issue (Darling-Hammond, 2010). According to Peske and Haycock (2006), teacher quality is the primary cause of the achievement gap. Their study noted that there are more unqualified teachers in high-poverty, high-minority secondary schools than in low-poverty, low-minority schools. The teachers that are qualified in high-poverty, high-minority schools generally teach the advanced classes. Therefore, unqualified teachers teach the most at-risk students (see also Rose, 1989). It is no surprise that these students are failing to meet benchmarks. While being unqualified does not mean that quality instruction cannot occur, there is a direct correlation between unqualified teachers and low test scores, which can be a reflection of the instructional quality (Peske & Haycock, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2010). The least of the least qualified teachers, teaching the lowest performing students, in schools with the least amount of resources, creates a space for disadvantage to beget further disadvantage.

As stated previously, teacher quality influences instructional quality. Not only are urban students in lower tracked classes disadvantaged by having unqualified teachers, they also lack access to additional resources and high quality curriculum (Darling-Hammond, 2010). The curriculum offered to these students is skill and drill with little higher order or critical thinking. Pressure to perform well on standardized tests has also been a factor in teaching only skill and drill. Less challenging curriculum will not push students to accomplish more academically and can even be detrimental. Lost quality instructional time leaves students further and further behind their high tracked peers (Oakes, 2005). Low quality instruction is most often given through rote memorization of facts and worksheets. Students are not taught how to use these skills outside of the classroom and are not expected to try (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In some cases, lack of funding can be an explanation for not using additional educational resources. Even when urban districts tax at a higher rate, they cannot make up the financial difference of suburban districts (Payne, 2008). Museums and public libraries are excellent resources for teachers and students to use to further understanding, but not all schools have access to these resources. Because of this, teachers must find ways to provide students with the additional knowledge. It is unlikely that unqualified teachers will be willing to put forth the extra effort for students have already been deemed to be failures. The disadvantage continues to grow especially in urban districts where teachers must fight for additional resources. Though many schools have discontinued the practice of traditional tracking, de facto tracking still exists in most places. There are many equitable practices that teachers in urban schools can utilize regardless of their school's tracking status. I will highlight a few of these practices as ways for teachers to provide equitable instruction for all students.

Implications

As the discussion presented here details, research has not reached a consensus on next steps for offering equitable curriculum for all students. Therefore, teachers are left in the meantime to decide for themselves how to best teach their students. Practices such as culturally relevant pedagogy and response-to-intervention have been shown to provide students proper support and instruction. Changing teacher and student beliefs about learning can create opportunities to implement these practices in an equitable environment. Through this, teachers' beliefs about students will be changed, which can be seen through the cultural relevance of the instruction and the types of supports—RTI for example—that they provide for students to reach their full potential.

Changing Beliefs

A barrier to providing effective instruction is teacher belief. Teachers' beliefs about students' ability effect the instruction they provide. Therefore, teachers' beliefs about poorly performing students or students in lower tracks must be changed in order for them to have an equitable education. There are few teachers today that have not either been tracked while in school or taught in a tracked school. Because of this, almost all have some beliefs about the ability of each group. Those beliefs cannot be turned off just by the absence of tracking practices. All teachers must work to change their beliefs about both struggling and gifted learners. Beliefs that sustain inequity are detrimental for all parties involved. The process takes conscious effort from all involved and takes time to occur. With these belief changes, all students regardless of academic ability can be offered an appropriate and effective curriculum that will provide them opportunity to reach their full academic potential.

Worthy (2010) reported that even if schools have been tracked, the “regular” classes become synonymous with lower level classes while the “honors” classes are coveted. So, even if the official practice of tracking has been discontinued, teachers’ beliefs about students have not changed. Teachers must work together to change the belief that only gifted students can use higher order and critical thinking skills (Rosenbaum, 1999; Worthy, 2010). When all students are actively engaged in content, there tend to be less behavior problems and more learning is accomplished. A first step in this direction is for teachers to believe that all students can learn through challenging instruction (Welner & Burris, 2006). Oakes (2005) noted the difference in innate intelligence between students in lower and higher tracked classes. As tracks are often split among racial lines, the same can be said about minorities and white students. Deep-rooted racial tensions can prevent teachers from having the same expectations for their struggling students as their gifted students. While the supports and scaffolding may look differently, the same high expectations must be offered to all groups. A practice that can aid teachers in giving all students access to appropriate and effective instruction is culturally relevant pedagogy.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Teachers whose beliefs are that all students can learn from challenging instruction also use culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) to engage their students. Culturally relevant pedagogy was developed when Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) was studying effective teachers. She noticed that there were key aspects of their teaching that helped reduce school failure in minority students. The teachers in her study focused on promoting student academic success, developing cultural competency, and empowerment through critical consciousness (1995). Each of these areas require that teachers believe that their students can accomplish more

when they are challenged academically, are able to identify with the curriculum, and will be able to use what they have learned when they leave the classroom.

To promote academic success, teachers need to set high expectations for student learning and provide supports and scaffolding for their students to meet those expectations. The ability level of students can determine expectations. Because not all students will perform at the same academic levels, the ideal form of tracking can be a space to tailor expectations for each group. Expectations should be high for each group, but that does not mean they must all look the same. When setting academic expectations for a group, cultural competence should also be considered. Students need to see their cultures represented in the curriculum and be able to navigate other cultures as well. Teachers can use cultural information not only to inform supports and scaffolds for their students but also to incorporate it into the content to further learning. In addition to having high academic expectations and cultural competence, students need to know how to use the information learned in school to change the world around them or critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). When culturally relevant pedagogy is used to the benefit of students in all levels of grouping, student achievement can be improved.

Response to Intervention

RTI is a form of flexible ability grouping that provides leveled instruction with opportunity for mobility. The concept behind RTI is to provide students with intervention and support before they are too far behind to benefit from the interventions (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2010). Though RTI resembles tracking, it is different in that students are able to move within the three tiers depending on need of instruction. While RTI is generally used to help identify students with special needs, all students can benefit from the interventions. Tier 1 students are those that are on grade level and are successful without additional scaffolds and

supports. Instruction in tier 1 should still be challenging for students, but these students do not require extra help to attain the content. Tier 2 students are those that have initially been identified as needing additional time and support. Intensive instruction and scaffolding should be provided for these students to attain the content. As students show progress with these interventions, they are able to move back into tier 1. If students do not make progress, they are moved to tier 3. Core instruction is still provided to these students as in the other tiers, but even more support is provided for students. Increased time and frequency of interventions are recommended for tier 3 students (Buffum, Mattos & Weber, 2010). Because students learn at different rates, it is nearly impossible to expect all students to be successful with all content without interventions. When implemented correctly, RTI offers teachers a structured way of ensuring that all students get the proper support they need. In order to increase the effectiveness of RTI, teachers must believe that their students are capable of attaining the content and provide their students appropriate and relevant means to receive the content.

Conclusion

Though schools are being reformed every year, researchers have yet to find a one size fits all method of structuring schools for all students' success. I believe that this one-size fits all method does not exist because of the growing diversity of schools today. Each school has a different population of students with different needs and prior experiences. One size fits all reforms neglect to consider the context and needs of individual schools. These types of reforms cannot anticipate every possible difference among schools. Thus, the context of the school must be considered when deciding on how to structure school in ways that will effectively increase student achievement. The long debated practices of tracking have provided mixed results as to the equity of instruction for all students. Instead of looking for ways that will only improve

students' results inside schools, researchers need to look outside of the school building to see how those inequities further promote inequity inside. Housing policies and lack of access to healthy food, though outside inequities, affect students' access to resources or learning opportunities inside of school. If students are hungry because they did not eat breakfast, they are less likely to have the focus to learn. Students who live in government housing often live in unsanitary conditions or are zoned for under resourced schools. Outside of school inequities influence inside of school inequities. Once the opportunity gap outside of schools has been addressed, research can then look inwardly to address achievement. Until that point, I believe that teachers must assume responsibility for providing all of their students with appropriate and effective instruction.

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