

Issues in Tracking and Ability Grouping Practices in English Language Arts Classrooms, K-12

by

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The Issues

In 1977, the National Council of Teachers of English condemned the "transformation of the English language arts curriculum from a holistic concern for language development to sequenced but isolated and often unrelated sets of reading and writing skills"—practices that more frequently occur in lower-tracked classes—and urged "that NCTE actively campaign against testing practices and programs that, masquerading as improved education for all children, actually result in the segregation and tracking of students, thus denying them equal educational opportunity." Today the segregation of students, based upon perceived levels of ability in English language arts classrooms, continues to be a widespread practice in United States schools.

The assumption underlying the practice of tracking students based on perceived ability is that literacy is achieved through a hierarchical sequence of skills; whereas, the rapidly expanding body of research on language learning has repeatedly illustrated that language is learned holistically, not through isolated skill instruction. Research has also consistently suggested that lowered expectations for students (i.e., low-ability groups) result in lower student achievement. The segregation of students by perceived abilities denies students the opportunity to participate in the richest possible language/learning environment. Although tracking may benefit a small percentage of accelerated students (Slavin, 1991), there is no consistent evidence to support tracking and ability-grouping practices (Trimble and Sinclair, 1987). "What is clear," according to the Report of the NEA Executive Committee Subcommittee on Tracking (1990), "is that rigid academic tracking creates academic problems for many students from all socioeconomic and ethnic groups and also creates isolation by socioeconomic status and ethnicity" (p. 25).

NCTE's Strategic Plan's General Objective 7 states: "The Council promotes the institutional, instructional, and community conditions under which literacy best develops"; therefore, the Council must discourage tracking students in the language arts. NCTE's Resolution on Tracking (November, 1991) recognizes tracking as "a system which limits students' intellectual, linguistic, and/or social development" (NCTE, 1991).

The NCTE Resolution is grounded in overwhelming research that indicates

that "even under unusual circumstances nearly all students can learn as well in heterogeneous groups as in tracked classrooms and that students identified as average or below average often do better in heterogeneous classes" (Oakes, 1987, p. 7). Moreover, studies reveal that in lower tracks, students who need the most supportive environment get the least. In lower-ability groups, students are more likely to receive less rigorous instruction from the least competent teachers who have lowered expectations for students (Murphy, 1988). Goodlad (1984) presents research that indicates significant losses for the slowest learners in homogeneous grouping.

Likewise, Gamoran's analyses (1990) show that "better instruction is an important part of the reason high-track students score higher, and less effective instruction explains, to an extent, why low-track students score lower" (p. 3).

Of particular interest are Goodlad's findings of untracked classes—those containing students of mixed ability and achievement. Rather than instruction failing to meet the needs of the lowest achievers, as conventional wisdom would predict, "most of the mixed classes resembled the high more than the low track classes in nearly all of the areas studied" (1984, p. 156).

A recent synthesis of tracking studies (Slavin 1990) concludes that there is no overall positive or negative effect of homogeneous grouping in secondary schools. Research indicates that tracking results in enrichment *only* for those identified as gifted, because conventional achievement measures are perceived as representing total school learning. Oakes's research indicates that higher-ability students did better in heterogeneous groups. What Oakes found was that when higher-ability students worked in cooperative groups, they learned more because they gave explanations. This helped them develop deeper understandings, which they did not develop when they worked only with other higher-ability students. Here they stopped talking as soon as they arrived at the "right" answer and were unlikely to develop more than superficial understandings (personal communication, February 13, 1992). In terms of membership in instructional groups, Oakes (1990) reports this often parallels race and social class differences.

A scan through current educational journals reveals that across the nation, schools are attempting to make changes that are consistent with the nearly unanimous recommendations of numerous professional organizations, such as NCTE, which endorse efforts to detrack. Among these organizations are:

- The National Education Association
- The International Reading Association
- The Carnegie Commission (*Turning Points*, 1989)
- The College Board (*Equity 2000*, 1992)
- The National Governor's Association
- The National Association of State Boards of Education
- The National Council of Mathematics

The National Science Teachers Association
 Education Commission of the States
 Committee on Policy for Racial Justice
 National Coalition of Advocates for Students
 Council for Basic Education
 Massachusetts Department of Education (*Locked In/Locked Out*, 1990)

Recognizing the pervasiveness of tracking and ability grouping in the United States in English language arts classrooms, the National Council of Teachers of English has formed a committee to study issues related to tracking and ability-grouping practices in English language arts classrooms, K-12. Questions under study include:

- What are current tracking and grouping practices in K-12 English language arts classrooms?
- What are students' constitutional rights with regard to equal access to educational opportunities?
- What are the social implications of school tracking? How does school tracking promote cultural inequities?
- What are the results of tracking on the educational experiences of students?
- How does tracking promote overall educational inequity?
- How do instructional practices and curricular content differ between low-ability and high-ability classes?
- In what ways might magnet schools perpetuate racial, social, and economic discrimination?
- How does tracking affect teachers' expectations for students?
- What are successful alternatives to traditional tracking and ability-grouping practices?
- What are the consequences of academic and vocational tracking, in terms of limiting access to knowledge, inequitable instructional quality, inequitable student outcomes, and curricular inequality (Oakes, 1986a, 1986b)?

In Table 1, Murphy, Hallinger, and Lotto (1986) list inequities of instruction, time, and curriculum content:

Table 1
**Treatment Differentials Among Instructional
 Groups and Curricular Tracks: Patterns of
 Discrimination in Lower-Ability Groups**

INSTRUCTION

receive least prepared teachers
 teachers feel less comfortable teaching
 teachers are less knowledgeable about how to teach
 teachers spend less time preparing
 teachers hold lower performance expectations for selves
 more likely to receive instruction from aides
 negative and inappropriate performance expectations for students
 objectives less likely to be explained
 materials introduced less clearly

less time spent on introductory learning activities
 less interactive teaching; more worksheets
 less teacher clarity in presentations
 more chaotic learning structure
 greater confusion as to appropriate modes of participation
 fewer work standards provided
 students held less accountable for work
 reduced quality of teacher-student interactions
 less teacher enthusiasm and warmth

TIME

instruction begins later in the class period
 more instructional time lost during transitions
 more time spent with no work assignment
 more time lost due to student interruptions
 more time lost due to teacher interruptions
 disproportionate amounts of instructional time spent in controlling and managing behavior
 more class time devoted to homework
 more off-task behavior
 instruction ends earlier in the period

CURRICULUM CONTENT

content less academically oriented
 personal and social goals more important than academic objectives
 blurred academic content
 use of "relevant" subject matter
 lack of clear purpose and focus to classroom activities
 emphasis on therapy rather than learning
 fewer task-related interchanges between teachers and students
 material covered at slower pace
 lower-level objectives and functional skills emphasized
 fewer academic courses completed
 fewer academic standards specified
 fewer reports and projects assigned
 fewer homework assignments
 less academic feedback
 fewer tests given
 little emphasis on skill progression
 less sequenced and integrated work in individual classes
 more half-year courses
 fewer sequenced and integrated courses across years
 strong behavioral aspect to academic functions
 less counseling about appropriate course work to take

SUCCESS

more off-task behavior
 less academic learning time
 lower rates of success

Reprinted with permission. Copyright by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. Murphy, Hallinger, and Lotto, "Inequitable allocations of alterable learning variables in schools and classrooms: Findings and suggestions for improvement." *Journal of Teacher Education* 37 (6): 22-23.

Oakes illustrates the predictable consequences of academic tracking (with a trajectory graphic) in Slavin's (1989) *School and Classroom Organization* (p. 179). Students who are identified as high and low ability and are then tracked into high and low placements show, over time, wide discrepancies

in cognitive/affective outcomes. Low-track students suffer diminished outcomes while high-track students predictably show enhanced cognitive/affective outcomes.

Strategies for Action

Members of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) at their Annual Business Meeting November 24, 1991, in Seattle, Washington, passed a resolution calling for efforts to continue their campaign against the tracking of students into ability groups, charging that this practice limits many students' intellectual development.

ON TRACKING

Members of the NCTE Committee on Tracking and Grouping Practices in English Language Arts (K-12), who proposed this resolution, urged that classrooms should be communities of learners in which collaboration occurs among students of many abilities. They warned that when students are placed into tracked/ability-grouped classes, this language collaboration that aids learning may not occur. The committee members pointed out that placing students in tracks or ability groups, especially those based on standardized test scores, can have a negative influence on teachers' expectations of students and students' expectations of themselves.

RESOLVED, that the National Council of Teachers of English support curricula, programs, and practices that avoid tracking, a system which limits students' intellectual, linguistic, and/or social development;

that NCTE urge educators and other policymakers to re-examine curricula, programs, and practices that require or encourage tracking of students in English language arts;

that NCTE support teachers in their efforts to retain students in or return students to heterogeneous English language arts placement; and

that NCTE expand its efforts to educate the public about the effects of tracking.

The National Council of Teachers of English recommends the following strategies for action to detrack English language arts classrooms, K-12, and to provide more equitable instructional equality, student outcomes, and curricula opportunities:

- Promote teacher inservice education to support detracking efforts and to explore tracking alternatives. Untracked classrooms look different than traditional ones. Integrated curriculum models, project-related activities, whole language philosophies, peer tutoring, portfolio assessment, to name a few, are efforts that support classrooms with more equitable opportunities. State affiliates should be contacted for staff development in these alternative teaching/learning situations.
- Distribute tracking-related materials to faculty, school boards, administrators, community, and parent groups to inform these groups of the effects of tracking and of alternative strategies. The NCTE publication *Off the Track* (in progress) aims at informing the public as well as the

local educational community. Included in this publication are sample letters to school boards and sample news releases discussing issues related to tracking.

- Promote convention and conference attendance where topics related to the issues of tracking and detracking are discussed. NCTE and its state affiliates as well as ASCD and its state affiliates sponsor individual sessions, informal study groups, and workshops on tracking. Contact these professional organizations for upcoming conferences and workshops.
- Promote the idea that teaching students in heterogeneous groups allows for excellence in teaching English language arts, K-12. NCTE recommends returning students to heterogeneous classrooms for the benefit of all students (1991 Resolution of tracking). On a local level, educators can share with colleagues, school boards, and the general public current language learning research that supports heterogeneous grouping in English language arts.

Resources

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 12450 N. Pitt Street, Alexandria, VA 22314.

Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Wisconsin Center for Educational Research, 1025 W. Johnson Street, Madison, WI 53706.

Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 95 Berkeley Street, Boston, MA 02116.

National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096.

National Education Association Instruction and Professional Development, 1201 Sixteenth Street N.W., Washington, DC 22036.

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