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IS ABILITY GROUPING EQUITABLE?

ABILITY grouping is one of the most common ways to provide for student differences, but is it equitable? As currently practiced, it typically leads to inequitable outcomes.

We must remember that decisions about grouping are preliminary, and what matters most comes next: decisions about what to do with students after they are assigned to classes. Given poor instruction, neither heterogeneous nor homogeneous grouping can be effective; with excellent instruction, either may succeed.

"Curriculum tracking" and "ability grouping" are sometimes used interchangeably. I use "tracking" to mean broad, programmatic divisions that separate students for all academic subjects. I use "ability grouping" to refer to divisions among students for particular subjects. Ability, however, is not usually the criterion for grouping: Students are typically divided according to measured or perceived performance in school.

There is little evidence that tracking or grouping by ability produces higher overall achievement. I conclude that grouping and tracking rarely add to overall achievement in a school but often contribute to inequality. This finding is most consistent for high school tracking but is not uncommon in other forms and at other levels. Typically, it means that high-track students are gaining and low-track students are falling farther behind. But effects of ability grouping are not the same in every context, and we need to discover how they come about in order to improve productivity and reduce inequality.

Why does tracking often benefit high achievers but not their counterparts in other groups? A number of case studies and a few surveys on what goes on in different groups and tracks suggest that the quality of instruction and the climate for learning favors high-level groups and honors classes over low groups and remedial classes.

At the elementary level, several researchers have documented fast paced reading instruction in highlevel groups and slow-moving progress in low groups. Other researchers indicate that low reading groups offer a less conducive learning environment, with more interruptions than middle and high groups.

Differences in context and climate have also been described at the secondary level. Although problem solving and critical thinking are not especially common, they are more likely to occur in high tracks than low tracks, where instruction tends to be fragmented, emphasizing worksheets and recitation. Teachers in low-track classes spend more time on behavior management and less on instruction.

Students' responses to instruction also differ across tracks and ability groups. Low-track students are offtask more often, spend less time on homework, and turn in fewer assignments. Case study writers have long contended that tracking polarizes the student body into "pro-school" and "anti-school" groups. The latest survey research supports this claim.

Although the research is not definitive, it does suggest two actions:

Reduce the use of tracking and grouping. Generally, the more rigid the tracking system, the more research studies have found no benefits to overall school achievement and serious detriments to equity. Students who report being assigned to different tracks in high school become more unequal in achievement over time, and the increase in inequality is greatest in schools where students rarely change tracks. In moving to reduce grouping, then, the first step should be to eliminate the most rigid forms of tracking, such as broad, inflexible program assignment in high schools and between-class tracking for the whole day in elementary schools.

Efforts to reduce tracking must grapple with the fact that in at least some cases, high-track students perform better than similar students in heterogeneous classes. Elimination of grouping must be accompanied by staff development opportunities for teachers to learn strategies for enhancing the learning of all students in classes that are more diverse than those to which they are accustomed. Those who strive to maintain ability grouping out of concern for high-track students must come to grips with the growth in inequality that occurs in many cases.

Improve the use of ability grouping. To the extent that grouping is not completely eliminated, it must be implemented more effectively. First, avoid locking in teachers and students to their track assignments. Permanent assignments result in a vicious cycle in which the expectations of teachers and students enter a downward spiral.

Schools must make at least two sorts of investments to bring greater flexibility to their grouping systems: They must reassess students' capabilities and take new information into account when making assignment decisions, and they must enable students to make up curricular material they may have missed-e.g., in tutorials during the school year or the summer-so those ready to advance are not held back by lack of curriculum coverage. The latter requires investment not just by schools but by students, who must undertake extra work to catchup. Implementing more flexible grouping systems also means rotating teachers so all students have opportunities to learn from the most effective teachers and to prevent the loss of morale that sometimes occurs for teachers assigned to low tracks year after year.

Second, those who use ability grouping must improve instruction in low groups. This could, at the same time, reduce the inequality that often results from grouping and raise the overall level of achievement in the school. This recommendation is difficult to follow because (1) by virtue of their assignment, teachers and students in low tracks have low expectations for academic work, and (2) low-track students often resist challenging academic work.

Can high-quality instruction ever take place in low-status groups? We have many more examples of unsuccessful low-track classes, but in some circumstances, low-group students receive effective instruction. At the elementary level, grouping systems that divide students on the basis of skills closely related to the curriculum and those that adjust curriculum and instruction to address students' needs are more likely to be effective. Although this conclusion is based on studies of within-class grouping for math and cross-grade, subject-specific grouping for reading, the conclusion is probably generally valid.

At the secondary level, a few case studies suggest low-track classes may serve their remedial purpose-to allow students to catch up, or at least prevent them from falling further behind-provided teachers hold high expectations as manifested by emphasis on academic work, provided teachers exert extra effort compared to efforts in other classes, provided teachers and students have opportunities for extensive oral interaction, and provided there is no procedure in place that assigns weak or less experienced teachers to the lower track. (These case studies rely on private schools mostly with middle-class students; there is not yet evidence that they generalize well to other situations.)

One ninth-grade English teacher whose low-group students kept pace with their peers in other classes, told her students: "I know it's not easy, you guys-but we're not going to read Weekly Reader in this class. All right? You deserve to have this information, so stick with it." With such a persistent teacher, and equally persistent students, low-track classes may be effective, but this is too rare for one to have confidence it will become the general case anytime soon.

This is all the more reason to curtail tracking and grouping where possible.

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