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ABSTRACT

The injustices of tracking or ability grouping according to degrees of learning, first noted in reading classes throughout elementary grades, can have a bad effect on little children, who do not understand these injustices. In the history of the rural school, where individual help and cooperative learning were practiced, no child was labeled a slow learner and there was community involvement and considerable cooperation. Many of these same practices are being recommended by reputable educators today. Alternatives to tracking begin when schools no longer interpret "all children can learn" to mean that all children can achieve their very different potentials only when children of like potentials are grouped together. Diversity within the classroom enriches the learning environment. Teachers must be properly trained in handling detracking, receiving help from specialists trained in dealing with attention deficit disorder and behavioral and emotional problems. Starting slowly, challenging all students, identifying teams as mixtures of strength, communicating the program to parents, designing clear activities, using appropriate acceleration, and making each student accountable are among a few of the suggestions from educators who have had success with detracking. Detracking is more in keeping with the democratic way of life than is tracking, and, therefore, its adoption should be seriously considered if the best interests and needs of all children are to be met. (Contains eight references.)
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Detracking Discussed

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Throughout many past decades, witness was borne to the practice of tracking (ability grouping) and some of its injustices. These injustices were first noted in the reading classes throughout the elementary grades where, though it may not have been called tracking, it was ability grouping. Some of these injustices are remembered. Unfortunately, injustices which little children don't understand, can have a bad effect on them. They play with their friends at home or school but must be separated in reading class.

Ernest Boyer, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, has, on several occasions, said that "if this nation would give as much status to first grade teachers as we give to full professors, that one act alone would advance the quality of the nation's schools."

It seems so unjust for a young child beginning an experience which should be a happy one, leading to a life-long interest in learning, should be made to feel frustrated, inadequate and unhappy.

First of all, the names given to the various groups - "The Tortoise Group" for the slow learners and "The Hare Group" for the fast learners. Are the "slow learners" properly labeled? Is it possible that they may have a problem interfering with their learning ability? Perceptual

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handicaps, emotional problems, behavior problems, an attention deficit disorder are among the many reasons why they might not be using their learning ability. Added to this, their particular learning styles might not be recognized and respected.

It is strongly believed that teachers should be given help by specialists in dealing with any area of difficulty interfering with a child's use of his/her potential learning power.

As a young teacher, many years ago, it was felt that the reading groups should have been more flexible. An example follows:

If the children in the fast group were reading a story about horses, it was strongly felt that little John, in the slow group, who loved horses and spent every summer at his uncle's horse farm, should have been a guest of the fast group, as he probably could have contributed a great deal of information about horses and also earned the respect and admiration of his "hosts." Interest grouping is enjoyable, and it stimulates thinking and questioning.

Another injustice was the use of rows of seats - one row for the slow group, another for the middle group and still another for the fast group. Though the groups were not called by name, the children were well aware that they referred to degrees of reading ability.

It may be that early recognition of the injustices of tracking were founded in the fact that I had attended a rural school in northeastern United States where there was no tracking. There was, however, cooperative learning, individual help and a great deal of caring. There was ethnic diversity and a strong community sense.

The history of this school is most interesting and encouraging, as it shows what can be done when people cooperate, do the very best they can with what they have, no matter where they are. They accept changes as challenges, give them a great deal of thought and gradually adapt to them in the best interests of all concerned.

Some of the Board members, though uneducated, showed great foresight. One who recognized the diversity in ability among students, proposed that the Board, composed of immigrants, as well as native Americans, vote in favor of allowing those interested in going to a vocational school not too far away, the same amount of money allotted for tuition for those going to high school in a nearby town. Any difference was to be taken care of by the parents of those going to vocational school. The parents were happy to have the opportunity to do this.

The success rate of the graduates of the one-room school and the vocational school was practically 100%, and the major crime rate practically zero - definitely no major

crime rate. It is felt that the strong community sense played no small part in this record.

Another success story for the teachers who braved many hardships, the board of education, the supervising principals, the parents and former students connected with this little one-room school which opened in 1821, closed in 1948, and is now "The Thomas Warne Historical Museum and Library," appeared in the latest Newsletter; it follows: "The Thomas Warne Museum is now 'on line' (computer terminology) at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., for our manuscript collection."

Granted, urban and suburban schools of today are not to be compared with rural schools of yesteryear. However, they most certainly have many more advantages. Teachers are better trained; much research about educational problems has been, and continues to be offered; technology furnishes unlimited material and continues to do so; school living quarters are much better equipped - better lighting, heating, plumbing, air conditioning, etc.

It seems ironic, though, that many of the practices being recommended today by reputable educators - detracking, needed help for individuals, cooperative learning, respect, responsibility, caring, etc. were in practice many years ago.

Each child was loved and respected for who he/she was. James was an excellent example of this. A fifth grade student, he got up early each morning during winter, rushed to school, lighted the huge furnace in the front of the room and had the room pleasingly warm when we arrived. Everybody loved James!

In later years, James went to work in a factory and was very successful at what he did. He became a good citizen, a good husband and a good father.

Another example of labeling children as non-learners is Charles who had a pronounced speech difficulty. Some years later, Charles got a job in a factory and was doing very well. We were all surprised and happy to read in the local paper, the following title of a news item: "Charles B. Wins Bonus for Inventing _____." (Invention not remembered.)

These examples are but a couple of many examples, but they make us think twice about labeling students as slow (nor non-) learners - slow learners of what?

Oaks and Lipton (5) explain, "Alternatives to tracking begin to make sense when schools seriously entertain notions as 'all children can learn,' rather than simply to mouth them as meaningless, if well-intentioned, slogans." And when they no longer interpret such statements to mean that all children can achieve their very different "potentials,"

educators can let go of the belief that children of "like potentials" must be grouped together.

These shifting conceptions of intelligence and learning have enabled a number of schools to support detracking by setting up heterogeneous classrooms in which instruction challenges the sense-making abilities of all capable (if different) children and in which differences become assets rather than liabilities.

Susan Benjamin, of Highland Park (Illinois) High School described the values underlying untracked classrooms at her school. "In the English Department," Benjamin wrote in the March 1990 English Journal, "the basic philosophy is that diversity within the classroom enriches the learning environment."

A number of educators credit Howard Gardner and Robert Sternberg, who believe that intelligence is multi-faceted and developmental, and that learning is a complex process of constructing meaning, with changing their previous and long-held views favoring tracking. The compelling arguments of Gardner and Sternberg have convinced some educators to set up heterogeneous classrooms in their schools, and some success stories are being found in reputable educational periodicals.

Oaks and Lipton have this to say about the analyses and anecdotes about attempts to detrack: "These individual

anecdotes and analyses are of great interest to educators and policy makers who are contemplating detracking. But far more important is the general lesson that can be drawn from them." They explain the lesson in some detail:

This lesson is that a culture of detracking is more important than the specific alternative or implementation strategy chosen. While the particulars of detracking vary considerably from school to school, there appear to be commonalities in the culture of schools that detrack successfully. These commonalities don't always take the same form, and they don't follow any particular sequence. But in some form, at some time, the following characteristics become part of the culture of "detracked" schools:

1. recognition that tracking is supported by powerful norms that must be acknowledged and addressed as alternatives are created;
2. willingness to broaden the reform agenda, so that changes in the tracking structure become part of a comprehensive set of changes in school practice;
3. engagement in a process of inquiry and experimentation that is idiosyncratic, opportunistic, democratic, and politically sensitive.

Oaks and Lipton also issue a warning against the copying of detracked programs being reported, as one school's success can be a failure for another. This is felt to be very good advice, as throughout many decades, witness was borne to the utter failure of copied programs. No two schools are alike just as no two children are alike. Obviously, the needs of each must be met.

Richard S. Marsh and Mary Ann Raywid (4) visited 10 Long Island, N.Y. school districts, where they were told how the districts make detracking work. They said they concentrated at the junior high level "because that is where tracking becomes formal." They explained further:

"The widespread move toward middle schools certainly fosters detracking. Both the concern of middle schools with youngsters and their needs, and the middle school commitment to equal access to education are incompatible with tracking. And the literature on middle schools vehemently rejects tracking."

Needless to say, the importance of the principal's belief in detracking and his support and encouragement to teachers is very important if the detracking is to succeed.

Marsh and Raywid found ingenious activities by principals and assistant principals to make "doubters" question their own beliefs. They offer us examples of what they found:

"One assistant principal used a reasoning test to demonstrate the range of thinking ability among a group of youngsters assigned to high-ability classes. If some were capable of formal thought and others were not, just how homogeneous was the presumably similar group? Teachers and board members later took the test as well, which stimulated

substantial reflection on the part of staff members and policy makers."

Another administrator distributed Howard Gardner's Frames of Mind to his board, and presented a seminar on Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences to challenge the conception on which homogeneous grouping is typically based. Marsh and Raywid offered still more examples, followed by their opinions about a change from tracking, which has been in practice so long, to detracking which is thought by some educators to be in the best interests of all children. They write:

Generally, however, so fundamental a change in school culture as detracking demands more than collaborative reflections; it requires reflective examination of a challenge to existing beliefs. Cultural change involves a modification of what has been assumed to be true and desirable. Such modification requires that somehow the taken-for-granted be redefined as problematic. The most effective way of accomplishing this appears to be a presentation of some convincing challenge to the beliefs of group members.

As such cultural change begins, two sets of skeptics and resisters are not uncommon. One group doubts that classrooms can work effectively in the absence of ability grouping; the other believes that something important is lost without it.

Marsh and Raywid found that reluctant teachers in strictly tracked programs feel that instructional strategies with which they are familiar will not work in heterogeneous

classrooms. This indicates that teachers must be provided with additional pedagogical strategies if detracking is to be successful. In addition to instructional strategies, some teachers expressed a need for new kinds of assessment to determine student progress.

Marsh and Raywid found that people in the districts with which they were concerned were convinced that a number of changes in organizations play an important part in detracking. Some of these changes include class size, personal tutorial help, marginal changes in teacher and student schedules, etc.

They concluded that if a detracking effort is to be successful, the magnitude of the many changes involved must be acknowledged and dealt with satisfactorily. Needed changes must be very carefully planned and initiated; concerns of the skeptics and resisters must be met. Needless to say, teachers must be prepared adequately; and provision must be provided for the necessary organizational structures and practices to support the new grouping assignments.

Cooperative activities have been recommended by a number of educators, and they call for smaller groups if all children are to profit by them.

Paul J. Vermette (7) has offered eight pointers for teachers who are considering to initiate cooperative

learning. He considers these pointers to be particularly useful during the critical first stage. His suggestions follow:

1. Start Slow, Start Short.
2. Design Clear Activities.
3. Make Each Student Accountable.
4. Monitor the Groups.
5. Identify Teams as Mixtures of Strength.
6. Use Grades Wisely.
7. Use Teams Every Day.
8. Leave Teams Intact.

For better understanding by teachers, each of these pointers is enlarged upon by the author. It is felt that they are worth considering, as witness has been borne to the failure of programs because they were started too fast and without adequate preparation. It is also felt very important to make each child accountable if we want all "doers" - no "non-doers," as observed in the past.

In "The Research Spotlight," by Terrence N. Tice (6), in the September 1995 issue of The Education Digest, Tice offers a report on Cooperative Learning in an article, "Effects of a Cooperative Approach in Reading and Writing on Academically Handicapped and Nonhandicapped Students," by Robert J. Stevens and Robert E. Slavin. It is felt that the article offers food for thought. Highlights of it follow:

All groups of students, including mainstreamed handicapped, progressed in the several measured achievements within schools that had adopted a Cooperative Integrated Reading and

Composition program, second through sixth grades. There were no significant effects, as measured, on students' attitudes to reading and writing, however, despite their experiences in heterogeneous learning teams.

Other studies on this program have shown similar effects for disadvantaged students, whereas this one focused primarily on schools in suburban working-class neighborhoods.

Clearly, this is not just another way to get the job done. It is puzzling, however, that improvement in attitude toward reading and writing was not shown. What further ingredients should be folded in here?

This questioning by the authors is most encouraging, for it indicates that they are trying to find the right answer.

Paul S. George and Walter Grebing (1) say they are convinced that when a school administration and faculty bend their best efforts to the successful education of the gifted students in the context of the regular classroom, many parents of the gifted will be satisfied that their children are receiving the best education the public school can reasonably provide.

They explain such an effort taken in the Broomfield Heights Middle School in Broomfield, Colorado. They describe the strategies, efforts and compromises which they used in an attempt to challenge gifted students in the context of the regular classroom, and satisfy the parents

while preserving the best of the middle school concept for all students. The ten strategies are offered:

1. Use a block schedule.
2. Recognize effort and performance.
3. Challenge all students.
4. Raise test scores across the board.
5. Monitor what you do.
6. Communicate your middle school program to parents.
7. Explain heterogeneous teams.
8. Use appropriate acceleration.
9. Provide exploration and enrichment.
10. Offer exploratory sound courses.

The authors conclude: "Educators must find ways of providing excellence and challenge, of integrating gifted students into the life of the regular classroom. It may require special attention; it may require compromise. We must preserve strong public schools free of acrimonious battles over grouping waged between parents of the gifted and proponents of the middle school concept. In the end both groups swear allegiance to the same goal: a safe, challenging, and engaging education for all children."

Ruth E. Knudson (3) writes, "It is generally agreed that what is taught in English/Language Arts classes is the major focus of the school. Learning to read, write, speak, and listen are essential elements of an education, especially as they are linked to critical thinking. In the English/Language Arts classroom these components of effective communication are usually linked to the study of

literature, and the trend in many states is to whole-class instruction and a whole-language constructive approach to instruction and curriculum. She explains in some detail:

Constructivists come primarily from a learner-centered perspective which builds on children's interests and needs and provides choices, freedom and responsibility to children (Condon et al. 1993). Within this framework, the teacher adopts a facilitative role, involves children actively in the lesson, and includes material which is concrete. Allen Black and Paul Ammon (1992) argue that the goals of constructive learning are to develop the learner's cognitive strategies and to emphasize the process of instruction where skills will be acquired in a meaningful context. Classroom processes include cooperation and collaborative learning as well as an emphasis on speaking and writing, and peers model and give feedback to each other.

Among the conclusions and recommendations based on the survey were that, though many teachers at all levels indicated an interest in small groups as opposed to whole class instruction, they did not reflect social constructivist theory as the basis for their decision and interests; many seemed to express a whole language philosophy that is certainly not negated by the social constructivist approach. They emphasized a philosophy of language development and teaching which is consistent with more whole language teaching methods, focusing on the importance of language for communication and independent

interaction to develop oral and written language. Knudson concludes:

We left the study discussed here very impressed with the dedication to teaching and students exhibited by the educators who responded to the survey. We did not find everything we expected to find; specifically, we did not find clear patterns associated with homogeneous versus heterogeneous grouping, while we did find differences by school level. Teachers seem to be trying to move away from presentational teaching, at least its exclusive use.

A question comes to mind: what might have been some of the differences between teachers who responded and those who didn't respond?

As Oaks and Lipton pointed out, "Efforts to change a practice as deeply embedded as tracking address a broad array of normative and political concerns." However, if a number of dedicated teachers support it, and IF they are given the proper training, help and support, it is felt that they can do it, and do it well.

In the October/November 1995 issue of Reading Today, an IRA publication, there appeared an interesting and informative news item (2), a copy of which follows:

IRA's Washington Office helped make International Literacy Day by releasing a paper by IRA's Representative, Richard Long, titled "Learning Disabilities: a Barrier to Literacy Instruction."

In the paper Long argues that a large segment of school children are being mislabeled as

learning disabled, with long-term ill effects on their learning.

Long says that as budgets for students are being cut, many children who are simply having academic problems - problems without any neurological basis - are being labeled learning disabled in an attempt to secure extra services to help them.

The paper recommends that early intervention programs such as Reading Recovery and others that have been proven effective be used to forestall academic problems and bring struggling readers up to speed with their more proficient classmates.

For further information about the paper, contact the IRA Washington Office at 202-624-8820.

Conclusions

It is concluded that detracking is more in keeping than tracking with the democratic way of life and, therefore, its adoption should be seriously considered if the best interests and needs of all children are to be met.

It is also concluded that many children have been wrongly labeled. A child may have a perceptual problem; the learning style of another may not have been recognized and respected; another may have an emotional problem; still another may have an attention deficit disorder (ADD); and others may be behavior problems. These problems are among the many that can prevent a child from using his/her learning power.

Fortunately, there is now considerable knowledge as to how to handle these problems, and this help should be readily available to teachers.

Teachers should become familiar with the success reports of those who have practiced detracking, but they should not copy them in toto, for no two schools have the same needs.

It is concluded, too, that there are many different kinds of talent and that teachers shouldn't hesitate to question the reported handling of some. For example, should a child who has poor personal relationships, but is gifted in math, be advanced a level in math? Might it be better to keep him with his peers and offer him challenges in math?

Finally, it is concluded that those educators who truly believe in detracking should be fully aware that they have a lot of convincing to do and must keep up their courage to do it.

Implications for Educators

1. If you truly believe in detracking as a more equitable practice for all students, put forth every effort to convince the skeptics and resisters. Some feel that this might be accomplished best by working from the school outward into the community. (See reference 8)

2. The history of the rural school is worthy of note, for though it goes back years before Howard Gardner's theory that intelligence is multifaceted, differences in talent, needs and interests of each child were recognized and respected; individual help and cooperative learning were practiced; no child was labeled a slow learner; and there was community involvement and considerable cooperation. Finding a way to get a vocational education for those students who were interested and whose talents lay in that direction is an example of this cooperation.

3. Teachers must be properly trained in handling detracking, and they should receive help from specialists trained in dealing with special problems - behavior, emotional, ADD, etc.

4. Read the success stories of the educators who tried detracking, and take note of to what they attributed their success. Among the many reasons offered by the various educators that seem quite sound, follow:

- a. For those teachers attempting detracking, start slowly.
 - b. Challenge all students.
 - c. Monitor what you do.
 - d. Communicate your program to parents.
- Explain heterogeneous grouping.

- e. Use appropriate acceleration.
- f. Provide exploration and enrichment.
- g. Offer exploratory sound courses.
- h. Identify teams as mixtures of strength.
- i. Design clear activities.
- j. Give considerable thought to assessment.
- k. A number of organizational changes are needed for successful detracking.

These are among the many practices observed in the classrooms of teachers of yesteryear who had great insight, a strong humanitarian sense, and had the best interests of each child at heart.

Today's teachers can do it too, if they are well-trained and given the proper encouragement, help and support. This is absolutely necessary, as they are constantly being inundated with limitless materials, new reports from researchers, and the never-ending wonders of technology. Many teachers have confessed that they feel inadequate in the best use of the technological advances. Such help should always be available as problems arise. They have stated, too, that the instructional strategies with which they are familiar will not work in heterogeneous classrooms. Obviously, this requires adequate help.

5. There should be much more empowerment of teachers, as many of them have great insight in noting and solving educational problems.

6. Teachers should feel free to question research findings and the success stories of educators if they have reasonable doubt about the findings and/or reports.

7. Finally, they should exercise their voting rights and vote for the politicians who have the interests of students at heart.

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